I'LL MAIL YOU $1,000.00 IN STRICT CONFIDENCE

Yes, if you are steadily employed and of good character I will be glad to loan you $50, $100, $200, $300, $500 or up to $1,000.00 ON YOUR SIGNATURE! I'll send you the amount you need QUICKLY . . . and your friends, neighbors, family, even your employer will not be contacted. No wonder so many thousands of smart men and women like yourself have used Postal Finance's borrow-by-mail service for years — it's the best way to get money when you need it in complete privacy. There is NO time off from work . . . NO witnesses or co-signers . . . NO insurance required . . . NO embarrassing investigations. Just send in the coupon below TODAY. We will rush you a FREE Loan Application so you can get the money you need RIGHT AWAY!

YOU PAY ME BACK AT YOUR CONVENIENCE

Postal's *low lawful* rates mean LOW COST loans for you, supervised by the Banking Department of the state. That is one of the important reasons why men and women from all over the country rely on Postal Finance when they need money quickly. Our terms are so liberal that you can pay back your loan in small monthly payments out of your future earnings. Take as long as 20 months to repay . . . or pay it back within a matter of weeks . . . whichever fits your budget. If your loan is repaid ahead of time, you pay ONLY for the time you use the money . . . not a day longer!

You can borrow from the old, established Postal Finance Company with complete confidence. It is licensed by and bonded to the state, to do business under the Small Loan Law . . . your assurance of reasonable, low lawful rates and Supervised Reliability in your dealings with Postal. You will be happy to know that the average monthly interest on a $100 loan is only $1.73 on our 20-month repayment plan . . . $3.35 for $200 . . . $4.60 for a $300 loan. Even a person with small means can afford Postal's special service!

GET IT QUICK . . .

Our service is as fast as the United States mails . . . we are as near to you as your mail box. For really **quick service** rush us the coupon below, right NOW. As soon as we receive it we will RUSH by **Airmail** everything you need to get the money you want **right away** . . . FREE Loan Application and full particulars **in a plain envelope.** You'll be amazed by the speed with which we take care of your money needs!

Satisfaction Guaranteed

"If for any reason you are not completely satisfied with EVERY phase of our dealings with you, you may return the money within 15 days, and IT COSTS YOU NOTHING."

PAY ALL YOUR BILLS AT ONCE

There are many reasons why you want money RIGHT NOW. You may want to pay up all your bills . . . take care of personal or business emergencies . . . taxes . . . doctor, dental or hospital expenses . . . insurance premiums . . . educational expenses . . . seasonal purchases . . . or tide yourself or your family over some period of heavy expense. Does your home need repairs? Why wait until damage gets worse? Fix up your home NOW . . . take months to repay!

Whether you need money to repair your car, to buy furniture or pay up debts and bills . . . you will find that the Postal way is the intelligent way to solve your money problems. Just think, instead of having to worry about so MANY bills — you can pay EVERYBODY AT ONCE. Use this reliable way to keep your credit standing good in your town. Take advantage of this **quick service.** The money you need is here waiting for you. Get your FREE Loan Application immediately by rushing the coupon TODAY!

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!

Mr. D. J. Levitt, President
Postal Finance Co., Dept. C-3
15th & Harney; Omaha, Nebraska

Please rush to me in a **plain envelope** my FREE Loan Application and Full Particulars without obligation — so if I decide to borrow I can get the money I need RIGHT AWAY.

Name .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

Occupation ..... Age .....

Amount you want to borrow $.....

POSTAL FINANCE COMPANY

Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

Dept. C-3, 15th and HARNEY, OMAHA, NEBRASKA

Romantic WEST ANNUAL

1953 EDITION

160 page anthology of rangeland fiction.

25¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Featuring **WE WANT BEEF By Robert Dale Denver**
A Fast-Moving Range Novel—slightly abridged
Also TODHUNTER BALLARD · ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS
S. OMAR BARKER · FRANK C. ROBERTSON and others

THIS FAMOUS COUPON can be worth $25,000.00 to the man who recognizes its value

"Makes $120 a Month More"

"My I.C.S. training really paying off. Already netting $120 a month profit on my investment—with more to come."
—*J. R. Todd, Crane, Tex.*

Doubles His Salary

"Began as mechanic for $180 a month. On completion of my course, I had an increase to $360. Feel deeply indebted to I.C.S."—*John R. Musick, Davey, W. Va.*

Now Making $600 a Month

"My present salary is $600 a month. When I enrolled, it was $120. Could not have achieved this without I.C.S."
—*O. O. Braun, Waco, Texas.*

"$100 a Month Richer"

"Got my present job on strength of I.C.S. training. As result, I'm $100 a month richer."—*H. A. Howell, Big Spring, Tex.*

VERY FEW MEN ever sit down and figure out what their *total* earnings may be during the working years of their lives. Nor do they fully *realize* how very much LARGER that total can be if they start NOW to qualify for an increase in their weekly or monthly pay!

For example: Suppose you could increase your present pay by $25 a week. (See actual reports at left.) That amount alone—even if you didn't increase it one penny more during all the coming years—would total up to more than $25,000 in *increased* pay during the next twenty years!

Yet the famous coupon printed below has helped to bring thousands of men pay increases amounting to *many times more* than $25 per week. Besides, it started them on a road which led to bigger and bigger jobs as each year passed by—and to freedom from constant money worries for themselves and their families.

1900 Promotions in One 120-Day Period!

A recent Survey showed that—*in one single 120-day period*—1900 I.C.S. students were promoted to better jobs!

So it's no wonder that the coupon below is famous. For it is not a mere "piece of paper." It is a "ticket" which you can use to take you from where you are now to where you want to go—to a better job at bigger pay and with more interesting work, either in your present field or in one of the new, rapidly-expanding fields in which there is now a crying need for trained men.

Free 2 INTERESTING BOOKS

The coupon below, without cost or obligation, will bring you our Free Book about the subject you're interested in. You'll also receive, free, our book on "How to Succeed"—a 36-page goldmine of valuable advice telling Why People Fail, How to Pick Your Goal, How to Develop Your Hidden Talents, etc. To take full advantage of today's wonderful increased-pay opportunities, mail coupon NOW!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS ICS

BOX 3970Z, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the booklet about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

ART
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Magazine and Book Illustrating
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Automobile Mechanic
- ☐ Auto-Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing
- ☐ Diesel—Gas Engines

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Engine Mechanic
- ☐ Airplane Drafting

BUILDING
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Arch. Drafting
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Carpenter Foreman
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ House Planning
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Steam Fitting
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Electrician

BUSINESS
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Certified Public Accountant
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Stenography and Typing
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Personnel and Labor Relations
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Managing Small Business
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Petroleum—Nat'l Gas
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
- ☐ Plastics

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Concrete Construction
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Sheet Metal Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrician
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electric Power and Light
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ College Preparatory
- ☐ Mathematics
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Good English

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment—Metallurgy
- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
- ☐ Sheet Metal Pattern Drafting
- ☐ Refrigeration

POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Electric
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman

RADIO, TELEVISION, COMMUNICATIONS
- ☐ General Radio
- ☐ Radio Operation
- ☐ Radio Servicing—FM
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Telephone Work

RAILROAD
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Railroad Administration

TEXTILE
- ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Cotton Manufacture
- ☐ Rayon Manufacture
- ☐ Woolen Manufacture
- ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Textile Designing

HOME ARTS
- ☐ Dressmaking and Designing
- ☐ Cookery
- ☐ Tea Room Management

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Occupation_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

Romantic WEST ANNUAL

1953 EDITION
VOL. 1 NO. 4

Fanny Ellsworth, EDITOR

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A Novel

WE WANT BEEF ..... Robert Dale Denver 10

Two Novelets

SQUABBLE BY GAS LIGHT ..... Todhunter Ballard 106
COME HOME, MOUNTAIN MAN ... Robert M. Williams 144

Four Short Stories

THE BIG LONESOME ..... S. Omar Barker 88
SUGAR BABE ..... Frank C. Robertson 98
HIS BEST ENEMY ..... Ennen Reaves Hall 124
MUDDY WATERS ..... William Freeman Hough 134

Features

BILL OF SALE ..... Harold Gluck 6
WESTERN FRONTIERS ..... An Editorial 9
ROMANTIC RIPPLES ..... Harold Helfer 29
TO A RANCH GAL, Verse ..... Pecos Pete 61
BLISSFUL IGNORANCE ..... Edna Stewart 97

"We Want Beef," Copyright, 1943, by Warner Publications, and slightly abridged from the serial originally published in Ranch Romances. "The Big Lonesome," Copyright, 1946, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally published in the Second July, 1946, issue of Ranch Romances. "Sugar Babe," Copyright, 1946, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in 2nd November, 1946, Ranch Romances. "Squabble by Gas Light," Copyright, 1948, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally published in the Second September, 1948 issue of Ranch Romances. "His Best Enemy," Copyright, 1947, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally published in First March, 1947, Ranch Romances. "Muddy Waters," Copyright, 1943, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in Second June, 1943, Ranch Romances. "Come Home, Mountain Man," Copyright, 1947, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in First December, 1947, Ranch Romances.

Published and copyright, 1953, by BEST BOOKS, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York City 16, N. Y. Price 25c. In communicating with this publication, please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of characters used in stories and features are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Free Invitation to Riches!

Banish Money Worries

START LIVING!

$100,000 CASH PRIZES

1st PRIZE $50,000.00

The INDEPENDENCE PUZZLE CONTEST

Sponsored by the NATIONAL BOOK CLUB

200 Cash Prizes

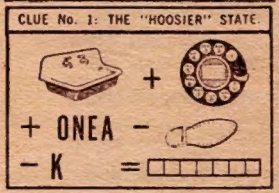
FIRST PRIZE $50,000.00

2nd Prize	$20,000.00
3rd Prize	$6,000.00
4th Prize	$4,000.00
5th Prize	$2,000.00
6th Prize	$1,000.00
7th Prize	$1,000.00
8th Prize	$750.00
9th Prize	$750.00
10th Prize	$500.00
11th through 100th Prizes, each $100	$9,000.00
101st through 200th Prizes, each $50	$5,000.00

GRAND TOTAL OF THIS OFFICIAL PRIZE LIST IS $100,000.00

How To Solve SAMPLE PUZZLE

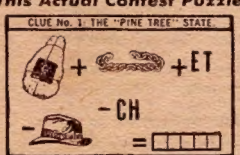
CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Easy? Yes! Now Solve This Actual Contest Puzzle

CLUE No. 1: THE "PINE TREE" STATE



Get the Facts FREE! Here's Your Chance of a Lifetime! *ACT NOW!*

What an opportunity for you to get on Easy Street! What a chance to END MONEY WORRIES! Think of it — $50,000 First Prize! — $20,000 Second Prize! Yes — here's your big chance to win more cash than you'd save all your life. The opportunity is YOURS — it's up to YOU to get the facts NOW!

Easy to Enter! Fun to do! No Gimmicks! Only Skill Counts!

The INDEPENDENCE PUZZLE CONTEST is the contest every puzzle-minded person in the country has been waiting for. This contest is sponsored by the National Book Club to introduce its publications to as many new friends as possible. Just look at the SAMPLE PUZZLE at the left. Here is a typical puzzle with every picture easily and quickly identified. Everything open and above board — nothing tricky. That's one big reason you'll agree this is among the fairest, squarest contests ever offered to American puzzle-fans.

Fair and Square — Only Standard Pictures Used! An Amazing New Concept in Puzzles

For the first time in the history of nation-wide contests, the Judges and Sponsor of the INDEPENDENCE PUZZLE CONTEST have decided to take their picture illustrations only from READILY AVAILABLE AND OBTAINABLE SOURCES.

AND MORE! Every solution to every puzzle has a point value according to an error-proof table of letter values. You will know AT ONCE if your answer is right or wrong.

Change Your Life! Win Real Riches!

You owe it to yourself to stop money worries and GET ON THE ROAD TO WEALTH. Think how you could use $50,000 or $20,000! And here's your opportunity. For the price of a postage stamp, we will send you FREE the Entry Form, the Official Rules, the First Series of Puzzles — EVERYTHING you need to enter. So make up your mind now — decide to *win*! Get the facts and MAIL COUPON TODAY!!

ACT TODAY! WIN A FORTUNE

Promptness Pays

1953 FORD EXTRA BONUS

If you mail the coupon postmarked within 10 days from the date you read this announcement, and you enter and win first prize, we will award a special extra promptness bonus of a brand-new 1953 FORD Convertible.

HURRY! $50,000 May Be Yours! MAIL COUPON NOW!

FREE INFORMATION — MAIL COUPON TODAY!

INDEPENDENCE PUZZLE CONTEST, Inc.
P.O. Box 911, General Post Office, Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

I want full particulars about the $100,000 INDEPENDENCE PUZZLE CONTEST. Please mail me FREE the Official Entry Form, Rules, and First Series of Puzzles.

NAME Harold R Jones

ADDRESS 404 Broad St

CITY Alester STATE Okla

(Add Zone, if any) 7401

☐ Check this box if you are mailing this coupon within 10 days from the date you first read this announcement.

PLEASE PRINT PLAINLY TPO

BILL OF SALE: One Western Wife

Some sauce for a goose who was prone to wander

●

A True Story

By HAROLD GLUCK

THERE WERE two very scarce items in the Old West, where miners looked for the precious metals. One was a good shovel and the other was a good wife. Henry P. T. Comstock had good shovels, and his mining interests in Virginia City were paying off. But he lacked a female partner to share his woes and mend his socks.

One day a Mormon from Salt Lake City, a little fellow named Carter, landed at the diggings. Carter announced he was looking for work and if he could find employment he would take up his residence there. His worldly possessions consisted of a dilapidated wagon drawn by a pair of sorry nags, and one wife.

Now Henry had gazed upon this female and his susceptible heart was affected. Being the man in charge of the Ophir mine, he hired Carter and set him to work.

But Henry wasn't a bit interested in the mining abilities of this man—it was the woman that got under his skin. For she would sit there in the end of the little canvas covered wagon and the sight of her face, nearly hidden by a clever calico sunbonnet, worked like magic. The fact that she had a husband had no significance for Henry.

One morning he and the female disappeared. They made a beeline for Washoe Valley where a preacher who was an acquaintance of Henry's pronounced them man and wife.

The next day the couple went to Carson City. While they were receiving congratulations, who appeared upon the scene but Mr. Carter. That irate gentleman announced, "This can't be! This woman is my wife."

Henry was able to meet the situation. He produced the marriage certificate, and pointed out, "See what it says on this here paper? We are man and wife." When Carter continued to protest, Henry went right into the economic aspects of the deal. "I'll give you a good horse, my six-shooter, and sixty dollars in hard cash for her. But you must agree not to bother me any more by claiming she is your wife."

Carter did some quick thinking, and decided on those worldly goods for his lady. As he left the scene, Henry remembered one more important detail that had been overlooked.

"Come back here, Carter," he shouted, "and finish this deal in a real business-like way. I want a bill of sale—otherwise you will keep on demanding more payment for her." Carter made out and signed a regular bill of sale, which Comstock placed in his wallet.

A few days later Comstock had some business which took him to San Francisco. When he reached Sacramento, word reached him that his wife had run away to California, by the Placerville route—not alone, but with a handsome youth who could spin honey phrases.

Comstock went into action. After all, he had a bill of sale for one wife, and this was no way for her to act. With half a dozen friends he hastened to Placerville and waited for the runaway couple. When they arrived he took his wife to his room and had a long talk. Then he went to tell his friends the result.

"She's downright sorry for running away from me. Now she's going to stay with me and be a good wife."

When his friends demanded he bring forth his wife he returned to the hotel. But he found no wife in the room—she

had climbed out the window and into the arms of that same seductive youth.

"To horse, to horse," was the general alarm. "One hundred dollars reward for the couple—alive," was what Comstock offered at the top of his voice. People liked the cash offer, but they couldn't ride after the fleeing lovers when they had no horses. So Comstock went to a livery stable and hired all the teams there were.

Most of those who accepted the teams went off pleasure-riding, and wouldn't have disturbed the runaways had they found them. For the miners had a lot of common sense and a nice regard for poetic justice in their hardened hearts. Comstock had stolen the female, and now another man was doing the same to him as he had done to Carter.

But there was one miner from California who was dead broke, and the reward money meant a stake for him. Next day he brought back the couple, his six-shooter cocked for action.

This time Henry had learned an important lesson: his wife could jump from low windows. He took her to a secure place in the upper story of the hotel. His friends decided to try a bit of theatrics to get rid of that seductive fellow before Henry filled him full of lead.

The youth had been locked up in a room, and the guard told him the sad, sad news. "We can't tolerate a man who runs away with another man's wife. We have decided to hang you."

The youth turned white and almost fainted. But the guard added some extra words. "I'm going out to the bar for a drink—and if I find you here when I come back it will be your own fault." The youth took the hint, and was never seen again in that town.

Henry had to pay the price of eternal vigilance to keep his wife with him. But when the little wild flowers began to blossom in the spring she got that wild feeling once again. One afternoon while Henry was at the mine she ran away with a long-legged miner.

Henry decided he couldn't keep on chasing the woman and paying out rewards for her. He decided to let her stay wherever she might be. Henry took a look at his bill of sale, sighed, and then went back to his diggings. Maybe Carter had gotten the best of the deal after all!

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

.. BOOKKEEPER .. C.P.A.

The demand for skilled accountants—*men and women who really know their business*—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business much more in the way of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions.

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. We train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

Send for *free* 48-page book describing the LaSalle accountancy training and the opportunities in this highly profitable field—plus "Ten Years' Promotion in One," a book which has helped many men.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION
417 S. Dearborn Street
Dept. 3329 HR Chicago 5, Ill.

Please send me "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays"—plus "Ten Years' Promotion in One"—without obligation.

☐ Higher Accountancy
☐ C.P.A. Coaching
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Law: LL.B. Degree
☐ Business Management
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Foremanship ☐ Stenotypy
☐ Industrial Management (Machine Shorthand)

Name.....*Age*.....
Address.....
City, Zone, State.....

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.

SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-353, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

She Got $400.00 for a Half Dollar
I will pay **CASH** *for* **OLD COINS, BILLS** *and* **STAMPS**

POST YOURSELF! It pays! I paid $400.00 to Mrs. Dowty of Texas, for one Half Dollar; J.D. Martin of Virginia $200.00 for a single Copper Cent. Mr. Manning of New York, $2,500.00 for one Silver Dollar. Mrs. G.F. Adams, Ohio, received $740.00 for a few old coins. I will pay big prices for all kinds of old coins, medals, bills and stamps.

I WILL PAY $100.00 FOR A DIME!
1894 S. Mint; $50.00 for 1913 Liberty Head Nickel (not Buffalo) and hundreds of other amazing prices for coins. Send 4c for Large Illustrated Coin Folder and particulars. It may mean much profit to you. Write today to

B. MAX MEHL, 133 Mehl Bldg., Fort Worth, Tex.
(Largest Rare Coin Establishment in U.S.)

NOW--Save Money And Insure Delivery Right To Your Door By Subscribing To RANCH ROMANCES Today!

The next sixteen issues (32 weeks) of RANCH ROMANCES would cost you $4.00 at the regular single copy price. But, by entering your subscription now at the special introductory rate of sixteen issues for only $3.00, you save a *full dollar!*

And that's not all! In addition to this big 25% saving, you'll enjoy the convenience of having copies of each issue delivered right to your door. And instead of *paying* extra money for this service, you *pocket* a dollar.

No other magazine in the field gives you SO MUCH — stirring, thrill-a-minute fiction (including at least one novel and many short stories in every issue)... daring tales of romance...true yarns of the Old West...regular round-ups of Western movies and movie stars written by the famous actor, ROBERT CUMMINGS...rodeo reports...and SCORES of other exclusive features.

Don't miss this opportunity to start RANCH ROMANCES coming your way regularly at BIG savings. Fill out and mail the coupon below today!

Your INSURANCE Policy

By subscribing to RANCH ROMANCES, you not only save $1.00 over the single copy cost of sixteen issues, but you insure yourself against missing a single issue due to newsstand sellouts . . . and you protect yourself against possible price increases as well.

RANCH ROMANCES • *10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.*

Yes, I want to take advantage of your money-saving offer! Here's my $3 for a 32 week introductory subscription (16 big issues) to RANCH ROMANCES.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....**Zone**.....**State**.....

RWA-3

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage; $1.00 for foreign)

Western Frontiers

LIFE IN THE OLD WEST has leveled off considerably since the lusty, brawling days of the range wars, but the stories of those days live on. We are happy that we have the chance to keep them before you.

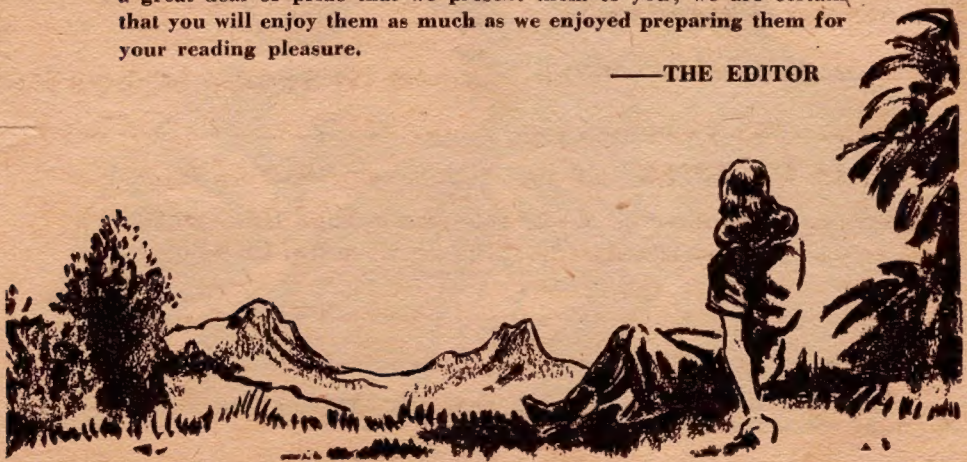
It's a warming thought that all of us, no matter what part of the country we call our own, have some part in the history of the American West. The pioneers who not very long ago broke across the forbidding frontiers of the never-never land beyond the Father of Waters carved out for themselves, and for us, a fair-sized slice in the history of the nation. The saga of the prospectors, cattlemen, nesters and sheepherders—and their womenfolk—presents a colorful, inspiring background for the greatness that has developed from their efforts.

No story of the West would be complete without the cowboy, a real favorite the world over. He is a character who is understood, loved, and admired. He has the kind of courage that isn't afraid to fight against heavy odds, the kind of everyday honesty that will call a spade a spade even if it leads to a punch in the nose. About the only thing that can throw a cowboy off balance is a pretty gal—especially a pretty gal who has a loop aimed in his direction.

In our novel, WE WANT BEEF, Robert Dale Denver recounts some of the struggles of the cattlemen who settled in the lawless West, and of a cowboy who had a considerable rôle to play in the ensuing feuds. The cowboy's lady love conveys to us many of the characteristics of those women who followed their men to a wild, strange country—she's full of spirit, humor and freedom. Our shorter stories deal with the other problems—both two- and four-legged—early Westerners met when they settled in the Territories. The collection allows us to share in the hopes and frustrations, the fears and courage, the laughter and tears of the people who dared to face the unknown.

Each of these stories was chosen for its special merit. It is with a great deal of pride that we present them to you; we are certain that you will enjoy them as much as we enjoyed preparing them for your reading pleasure.

——THE EDITOR



WE WANT BEEF

by ROBERT DALE DENVER

Copyright, 1943, by Warner Publications, Inc., and slightly abridged from the serial originally published in Ranch Romances

I

HEY THERE, cowboy!"

Kirby Grant drew up his blocky blue roan cowhorse and turned in his saddle in the direction from which the sharp order had come. In front of the ornate four-story brick structure, with

***THE RECKLESS COWBOY** and the valiant girl had*

the choice—to surrender or to fight a losing battle

the ornate name of Bonanza Palace Hotel, stood a middle-aged man with the gold law badge of a marshal on his chest.

"We don't like to see guns carried in this town," the marshal stated in a flat cold voice, nodding at the cartridge belt and walnut butt of the Colt at the rider's slim waist. The almost colorless eyes of the officer and the bold reckless blue of the cowboy met in a mutually appraising glance.

The marshal saw a lean-faced young fellow almost as wide-shouldered as himself, using such long stirrups that he appeared to be riding standing up. A cowboy with an expensive but battered saddle, a smoke-grimed wide-brimmed beaver hat, a faded blue shirt, a pair of heavy chaps.

"You can leave that iron at my office," the marshal went on, indicating a small building across the street which, judging by the barred windows, served as jail in addition to the marshal's office.

Kirby Grant said nothing, but the corners of his straight mouth drew down cynically. There were a lot of men wearing weapons in this lusty little mining city of Yellowrock, not openly, but in bulges showing under vests and bloused shirts, or in holsters down the inside of breeches. It was only a gun in the open evidently that affronted the officer. Kirby had heard of him. His name was Henry Grudd and he was known over most of the West. Grudd was well armed himself with two guns in black holsters, the left one worn with the butt reversed.

Kirby shrugged, the kind of shrug that can be more of an insult than words. Then he neck-reined the roan across the street to the single hitch-post in front of the marshal's office. Unbuckling his cartridge belt, he hung it and the attached holster on the post.

Then, indifferent to the marshal's angry glare, he rode on, his horse snorting suspiciously at the sights of Yellowrock, where both horse and man were plainly out of place. Most of the few cowboys who had joined the Yellowrock gold rush had quit their range garb, but Kirby Grant hadn't any intention of giving up either his garb or occupation, having no more desire to dig gold than to dig potatoes. He had the saddle warp of one who had spent most of his twenty-odd years in the saddle and planned to spend the rest of them there.

Riding along the main street, one of a dozen along the steep mountain slope, he let his eyes travel over the smelters, shaft houses and stamp mills in the mine district, the hundreds of business and residence buildings. From these he turned his attention to the street itself, cluttered with jerk-line freight outfits, two-horse wagons, strings of pack animals and hundreds of milling men—sourdough prospectors and dudish Easterners, gamblers in expensive garb, and ragged swampers.

A town of contrasts, Yellowrock, with lowly log cabins standing next to brick and stone buildings, with an opera house, the four-story hotel and dozens of shack saloons from which came the racket of pianos and fiddles.

He stopped to examine a single-story brick building. In front were two big windows framed neatly in brick with the sashes painted white, just under a white signboard on which was painted in blue letters:

FAT MEATS
JACK SPRATT, PROP.

Behind the clean windows lay a big white-walled store with glass cases and white counters above which hung three polished brass scales and sets of shining cleavers, meat saws, and a collection of sharp knives.

He dismounted, dropped his braided rawhide reins and entered, crossing a floor where his high heels sank deep in clean sawdust. Everything was a gleaming spotless white, even the legs of the battery of meat blocks and the doors of the huge coolers. Everything was there save a stock of meats. The cases were empty as Señora Hubbard's famous cupboard.

FOR THE WINNER, A HANGNOOSE FOR THE LOSER!

FROM A back door a short, roly-poly man with a moon face as red as raw beef emerged. The sort of man that ordinarily is jolly and laughing, he now looked out mournfully on the world from his blue eyes. This was Jack Spratt, Kirby guessed, clad in a big white apron, a white shirt, a white cap.

"You're Mr. Spratt?" asked Kirby.

"Yes, that's me," admitted the man dolefully. "Fat Meats, Jack Spratt—but no meats today, fat or thin. I've quit. For two reasons. One, that a lot of cattle I bought a week ago the brand inspec-

tors declared stolen and took from me. Second, that if I had the money I couldn't use it to buy any cattle to butcher, because there are no cattle to butcher, because there are no cattle to buy. You cannot do business without beef. Men demand beef. Men have to have beef."

"You won't get any quarrel out of me on that," said Kirby. "I raise beef and beef raised me. Supposing I had some cattle to sell. Would you want to buy?"

Mr. Spratt shook his head. "As I said, I'm broke. I'm going back to San Francisco to get a job. That will be easy. No one can cut up a beef as fast as Jack Spratt, and that's no brag. The owner of this building is taking all my fixtures for back rent—the finest butcher shop in the West. Are your cattle fat?"

"Rolling in fat," Kirby assured him. "Plenty of grass on the drive and we handled them like they were babies. I expect top prices."

Mr. Spratt shook his head. "There's a big shortage of meat in Yellowrock, but that don't mean a good price for your cattle. Maybe Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack will buy your cattle. They're selling the only meat to be had in this Yellowrock country at big prices, but they don't pay big prices for the cattle they buy. It's being said the cheapest meat will be a dollar a pound this winter in Yellowrock. No more cattle can come in from the west; the mountain passes are already filled with snow. But Heyden and Gormack won't pay you much for your cattle."

"Closed market, is it? said Kirby. "This Heyden and Gormack run things to suit themselves, do they? Buy low and sell high."

"There's a bunch of thieves running the meat business in Yellowrock," said Mr. Spratt vehemently. "I don't say no names, for there's no free talk in Yellowrock. It's not safe to talk here."

"Too bad," said Kirby. "Talking should be free and safe everywhere. When it gets too dangerous to talk, there ought to be a change."

He left the shop to the mournful Mr. Spratt and led his horse on down the street, stopping to call on two other butcher shops which offered for sale only a few hams and shoulders, some mutton carcasses, and a little sausage and lard.

No, they weren't buying cattle, the owners told him. Like Jack Spratt, they were quitting business, but Kirby could get nothing more out of them. They were plainly afraid to talk.

Heyden & Gormack's market occupied a prominent corner of the main street. It was a big barnlike establishment thrown up from rough lumber and sheet iron. Inside, the sawdust on the floor was black with dirt and the counters filthy, but the place was crowded with miners. Half a dozen butchers in blood-stained garb sweated at the meat blocks. A strong

stench pervaded the place. Offal had been thrown in corners, and what flies had survived the cold weather were evidently patrons of the Heyden & Gormack market.

"How many pounds?" a butcher asked Kirby. "Steaks and roasts, six bits a pound. Fifty cents for the rest and you takes what you happens to git."

"I've got beef to sell," Kirby returned. "Where are the bosses?"

The man nodded toward a side door that was ajar, and Kirby went in.

Two men were inside the office that was furnished with a rough plank table littered with papers, a few chairs and a huge old safe in a corner. Of the two men, the one sitting behind the desk appeared to be more of a gambler than a butcher. He was tall, whipstock-lean, with a hook-nosed face and a pair of cold gray eyes that would fit in well with a faro layout.

The other man sat on the table. He was bulky, big-boned, with burly thighs and calves, heavy thick wrists and ankles. His neck was a short stump surmounted by a bullet head and dark bristly face. Both were armed, with guns in shoulder holsters under the embroidered vest fancied by gamblers in mining towns.

THE PAIR looked at him, the bulky man with a black scowl. "Heyden and Gormack?" Kirby asked.

The whipstock man who looked like a gambler nodded. "That's us. I'm Heyden. What you wanting, cowboy?"

"I might have a few cattle to sell. Fat stuff—a few dry cows, but mostly steers. And a few sausage bulls."

"You drove across the Walker Desert?" asked Heyden. "We heard a bunch of cattle was moving along that trail."

So these two, thought Kirby, kept themselves informed on herds that approached Yellowrock.

"We came across the Walker," he said. "Considering the prices you're getting for meat, I suppose you'll make a pretty fancy offer for these cattle."

"You suppose wrong," said Heyden coolly. "We've got too many cattle now. Cattle are a drug on the market."

"That so?" said Kirby acting as if he were unpleasantly surprised. "Why, I figured these cattle could be turned quick and for good money. We'd like to get rid of them. Had a long drive. Surely you'll make some sort of bid on them."

Heyden's lean face showed no change of expression. "No," he said curtly, "we don't want 'em. Don't need 'em."

This pair, Kirby figured, were bluffing to beat down the price, as is the habit of shrewd buyers. "Bueno," he said carelessly, and turned to go.

"Just a minute," said the other man, speaking in a growling rumble. "We might see our way clear to give you boys a few dollars. Your stuff can't stand inspection of course."

Kirby turned. "Inspection? What inspection?"

Heyden shifted in his chair, trading a glance with his burly partner.

"So you haven't heard?" he said in his cold voice. "A lot of stockmen over parts of the West are complaining that cattle stolen from them have found their way to Yellowrock. Rustlers have flocked here, figuring Yellowrock is the place for them to clean up quick. We've even heard a girl is driving a small herd of stolen cattle this direction. Anyway, the stockmen have sent in three men under a fellow named Dike Scriven to inspect brands on all cattle offered for sale here. Of course, if you can show good title to your cattle, those brand inspectors won't worry you."

Kirby hesitated. Then he said blusteringly, "Of course I can show a good title. You aren't hinting I stole this stuff I'm offering for sale?"

"No, not that," said Heyden. "But I've heard that Scriven and the other two inspectors are on the lookout for four or five cowboys bringing a bunch of cattle across the Walker Desert. Cattle wearing a dozen different brands. You get Scriven to pass your cattle and we might make you an offer. Or if you want a quick bid right now, we'll take your cattle without even looking 'em over and

give you a thousand dollars cash."

"A thousand!" Kirby was highly indignant. "That wouldn't even pay for the time we spent driving the cattle here."

"Take it or leave it," said Heyden curtly. "But I'll make you a bet that's the most money you'll ever be offered. And let me show you something, young fellow."

He rose to point a finger through a dirty window at a hill above the town on which two high upright logs with a crossbar made a gaunt frame against the blue sky. "They used that for a hoist on a mine that petered out. For your information, over twenty men have been strung up by Miners' Court from that gallows. Part of 'em rustlers. Not," he went on suavely, "that we're against a bunch of young cowboys wanting to get themselves a stake. Better take our offer and dodge swinging from that gallows."

Kirby stared at the gallows on the hill and then drifted toward the door.

"I'll let you know if we care to deal with you," he stated, and he stopped in the doorway. "But meanwhile," he said, "you two sharks can both go to hell."

Out in the street, Kirby dropped into a restaurant for a beefsteak. The meat was tough as leather and cost a dollar and a half. A queer situation seemed to exist in Yellowrock, with beef selling at high prices and yet no market offered for cattle. Yet it wasn't so queer. From what he had learned, Heyden & Gormack had the market sewed up, selling practically all the meat to be obtained in Yellowrock and its neighboring camps. A child could guess that the pair were in cahoots with Scriven and the other two inspectors.

When he went outside again his quick eyes noted a tall, painfully thin man, with a prominent Adam's apple, standing before the restaurant, apparently idly watching the street. He changed position quickly as Kirby came out, as if he had been waiting for Kirby to appear. Pinned to his thin chest was a badge of some kind. Down the street were two other men with similar badges.

Kirby was not far from his horse, which he'd left with grounded reins next to a wagon piled high with freight. As he headed for the horse, the tall man stepped in front of him.

"You the one that brung those cattle across the Walker?" he demanded hostilely.

Kirby's eyes narrowed. "You just asking for sociability or working for a newspaper here?"

"Asking because I'm here to inspect cattle," responded the man harshly. "My name is Scriven. I'm a deputy sheriff, authorized to look at the brands of all cattle offered for sale in Yellowrock. We got a advance report on those cattle you brought across the Walker. They're all wearing brands of stolen cattle. I think you'd better come with me to talk it over." He nodded down the street in the direction of the jail.

The other two badge-men were drifting nearer, Kirby was noting. He didn't like this Scriven individual. To him the fellow had all the earmarks of a crook. He wore a long-barreled revolver in a skeleton holster and one long paw was not far from the gun butt.

"This an arrest?" queried Kirby quietly.

"You can consider it that," said Scriven.

"Where's your warrant?"

"We can fix that up mighty quick," snapped Scriven. "Come along now."

Scriven probably was a deputy sheriff as he claimed, but Kirby wasn't caring about that. With the county seat over seventy miles away almost anyone could get himself made a deputy sheriff.

"So you ain't coming, hey?" snarled Scriven, and without warning went for his gun.

Kirby lashed out with his right hand. The blow sent Scriven staggering back. Kirby whirled, ducked in behind the high freight wagon and ran to his horse to throw himself into the saddle,.

Behind him a man yelled. Then a shot rang out as Kirby turned the roan behind a string of tall mules with high

packs. Another bullet sang over his head as he was flashing into a side street up the slope. The blue roan streaked up the street while men hastily got out of the way.

Then, halfway up the block, an alley opened on his left. Kirby spurred down it to send the roan clattering over the sidewalk of the main street. He wasn't leaving Yellowrock without his guns, and his cartrdige belt still hung on the hitch-post. Marshal Grudd was not in sight.

Leaning down, he scooped up his guns and belt. Scriven was down the street, recovered by now to level his long-barreled gun at Kirby. Kirby neck-reined the roan and dug in the spurs, scattering men before him. The roan whirled down a side street toward the stream, a fork of the Yellowrock River, at the foot of the town.

II

A FEW MILES from the town of Yellowrock, the main fork of the river of the same name ran like a silver-gray ribbon between wide, gently sloping banks on which the grass still had a tinge of green. Occasional clumps of willow lined the graceful curves of the stream.

Almost as if it had been landscaped, thought Gail Camlin as she stopped her horse to survey the tiny valley toward which she had been journeying for many weeks. She pulled the horse to one side of the faintly marked trail, and a covered wagon dragged by a pair of bay mules came out of the junipers and tilted down toward the river. The driver was Ma Battles, an Amazon of a woman, bulging out something like the canvas top of the wagon, but handling the team capably.

"After that desert we crossed, St. Peter won't show me nothing purtier'n this," the woman remarked in a voice that went with her person. "My, look at that river, Gail. Living water!"

The girl smiled, her dark-blue eyes fixed on the stream. The river was nothing short of a miracle, with the grassy banks offering a good feed to the small herd of cattle that strung out after the wagon. The cattle lining out closely behind a big, crook-horned leader steer were good ones, mostly branded G C Slash, C C Slash, Gail's own brand and that of her father who had died six months before leaving Gail as sole heir.

With these cattle were a hundred head of mixed stuff, showing a strong longhorn strain, mostly steers, branded B-in-a-Box. The B-in-a-Box belonged to Gail's uncle, Starr Camlin, who had bought them to bring to the Yellowrock country as a speculation. He was not with the cattle now. Several weeks before he had left the herd to ride ahead to Yellowrock.

All the cattle were fat, hog fat, for luck had been with the drive. Heavy rains had provided plenty of grass and water even in desert country. And Gail had driven them carefully and slowly; she knew how to handle cattle. For over three hundred miles she had been in sole charge of them, helped by Ma Battles' husband, Poke, and the Battles' two boys, one fourteen, the other sixteen.

She turned to help Ma Battles find a camping spot, near a clear spring that came from a little cliff two hundred yards above the stream. Poke Battles, looking small beside his wife, came over to unhitch while Gail and the boys loosely bunched the cattle near the river after they had had their fill of water.

Poke Battles was a cocky, bustling redhead, who all his life had worn an air of supreme confidence, despite the fact that he'd rarely been able to produce as much as five dollars in cash. All the married life of Poke and Ma Battles, Poke had genially dragged his wife and children about in search of greener and better pastures. It had been providential for them, left stranded in a little desert town after a disastrous gambling session of Poke's, that Gail had been able to use the family on the trail drive.

They had already lunched an hour or so before, but Ma Battles now built a fire and put on a wash boiler to do some laundry. The cattle fell to grazing hungrily, and Gail rode along the river for

the sheer pleasure of it. She shoved her sombrero to the back of her head, letting it hang by the whang leather chinstrap, and the sun found glinting lights in her thick, blonde hair. She wore a buckskin jacket, a divided skirt, and she sat as jauntily erect in her Texas saddle as the straightest of the young willows that bordered the river.

She could breathe easily once more. They had made it safely to the Yellowrock country with the cattle that were her sole inheritance. They had crossed deserts where cattlemen had predicted they might starve or die of thirst. And she'd brought her own and her uncle's cattle through without the loss of a single head. After the sale of her little bunch of fat stuff at good prices, she could buy and stock a small ranch somewhere, maybe in California where she planned to go to visit relatives.

IN MID-AFTERNOON with the laundry drying on bushes, Gail and Ma Battles retired to a dense thicket of willows along the stream and, using a huge wooden tub and blankets, fashioned a make-shift bath. Ma Battles produced two cakes of soap which gave off a delightful perfume.

"French," she said reverently. "Poke bought 'em once when he was drunk. I think arrivin' here calls for something special."

Later, Gail lay flat on the grass near the wagon, relaxing for the first time since the start of the long trip, only to get hastily to her feet as two riders came along the river from the direction of Yellowrock.

She hoped one was her uncle, but instead the riders were an oldish fellow with a huge gray mustache and the unmistakable stamp of the cattleman on his small wiry body, and an extraordinarily tall cowboy in his thirties, decidedly handsome with a well-trimmed brown mustache, and garbed with a lot of silver trimmings. He rode a fancy sorrel and his saddle and bridle were heavy with silver. They came toward the wagon.

"Why, Mr. Bowers!" Gail exclaimed, identifying the old man suddenly. "Do you remember me—Gail Camlin? You bought cattle from Dad a couple of years ago."

"How could I fergit a pretty critter like you, Miss Gail?" returned Mr. Bowers, better known as Old Man Bowers, as he dismounted. "But it's shore flattering for you to remember a dried-up little hunk of gristle like me. I heard your pa cashed in. A mighty square honest man, your father. Miss Gail," he went on, "allow me to introduce Mr. Teft—Lon Teft. He's here as a stock detective looking for cattle that's been rustled, including part of a herd I brung in."

Lon Teft took off his big silver-banded hat with a flourish. His flashing smile and dark eyes indicated that he was pleased to meet Miss Gail Camlin, that he appreciated her youthful charms, and that he looked forward to a much closer acquaintance. He had a ready tongue when it came to women, the girl guessed, but before Lon Teft had a chance to unlimber it, Bowers was talking.

"But how come you to be here? These your cattle?"

"Part of them," she replied and explained about the joint drive of her own cattle with her uncle's, while Lon Teft rode down to look over the grazing herd.

Mr. Bowers, who had filled a stubby pipe, smoked thoughtfully for a few silent moments.

Then he said slowly, "You git these cattle outa here. Don't waste no time. Take 'em anywhere outa this Yellowrock country. You ain't got ary chance agin the skin game they plays on cow people here. I ought to know. I drove nigh on five hundred head into this country and they bamboozled me out of 'em. And me, in my life I been up a lot of canyons where the wolf howled loud and long. They taken and had me thrown in jail, and while I was in jail some fellers with the help of three fake brand inspectors in Yellowrock grabbed over half my bunch claiming I'd stole the cattle from 'em.

"Time I got outa jail, they'd sold the

cattle and skipped with the money. Heyden and Gormack bought the stuff and butchered it. It was plain robbery. The rest of my cows was run off by rustlers, which this Yellowrock country is plumb full of. Between them crooked inspectors and real rustlers, cattle folks ain't got no chance here—none in the world."

"And you couldn't get your money for the cattle Heyden and Gormack butchered?"

BOWERS shook his head. "Nope. Heyden and Gormack say they paid the men which this scurvy inspector hound, Dike Scriven, said was the legal owners. Scriven works hand in hand with Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack. What Scriven does is declare all stuff offered for sale in Yellowrock is stole. He claims to have a list of brands covering stock reported stole over parts of the West and they just take over your herd and you ain't got no comeback.

"It's open robbery, but if you yell too loud, Heyden and Gormack git the Miners' Court after you and you git strung up. They had three cowmen hung in Yellowrock since I been in the country. You git them cattle outa here, Miss Gail. Or else git ready for a fight you got no chance to win."

"I'd rather fight," Gail declared spiritedly, "even with no chance to win. There's no place I could take cattle this late in the year. But surely there's law in Yellowrock. It's a big town, I've heard."

"Marshal Henry Grudd's what law there is, but he don't interfere none with lynchings or cattle deals. Likely paid to keep his nose out by Heyden and Gormack. Them inspectors with their deputy sheriff badges is the law when it comes to cattle.

"And I'm betting them inspectors is on their way here right now. Saw 'em gitting their horses outa the livery stable just 'fore me and Lon headed out. Heard one of 'em say they was riding up the river to inspect some herd. And they'll do it, and run this here grafting rannikaboo over on you—spite of the fact they got no ghost of a legal right to do it. That river down there is the line of the county Yellowrock is in. Their deputy badges ain't no good over here."

Gail thought swiftly. "They just think they're going to inspect this herd," she announced.

The Battles family had gathered close to listen to the talk.

"Look here, Miss Gail," chirped up Poke Battles, "I ain't letting them fellers take your cattle. I'll just tell 'em off."

"Count me in on a ruckus, too," offered Bowers eagerly. "And I know Lon'd admire to offer his services. He's a real stock detective. Not a fake like Scriven's outfit."

Teft, who had returned from looking at the cattle, nodded with a smile that showed flashing teeth. "Count me in. Scriven and me, we been due to lock horns. It'll be a pleasure to help you out too, Miss Gail," he told the girl.

They had a few minutes at least before the inspectors could arrive, and she used the time to move the herd of cattle into the apex of a V-shaped park above the river and to plan the attack.

THEY WERE no sooner placed than four riders appeared around a bend in the river and came straight toward the wagon and herd. Leading was a long-necked man with an Adam's apple that stuck out like a knob. Bowers, who was behind a fallen log near the wagon, called to Gail, "Thet crane-necked polecat is Dike Scriven."

Gail, pretending to busy herself over

a cookfire, waited for the men. Outwardly she was calm, but her heart was beating fast.

"That's far enough, you three!" she called as the quartet rode within thirty paces of the wagon.

"We've come to inspect them cattle," said Scriven. "We got notice there's stolen cattle in this herd and we're looking over the brands."

"You got no notice of the kind," Gail contradicted the man. "Those CC Slashes are a brand my father owned for forty years and left me when he died. The GC Slashes are my own brand. The rest of the cattle, B-in-a-Box, belong to my uncle Starr Camlin. He bought them at Turley City. I witnessed the bill of sale. He got them from a man named Pryor."

"That's queer," said Scriven sneeringly, "for the real owner of them cattle, Pryor, is him." He indicated a fat man sitting a black crowbait of a horse. Unlike Scriven and the other two, he wore no badge.

"That's right," said the fat man. "Those are my cattle. Stole from me."

"He's a liar," muttered Old Man Bowers. "That hombre's name is Smedley. Been hanging around Yellowrock all summer. He's just saying he's Pryor to put in a claim for your cattle."

In Gail's mind there was a little doubt about the title to the B-in-a-Box cattle her uncle had bought. The deal had been made hurriedly, a man driving them up and offering to sell for a cheap price. But at least from Bowers' statement she knew that the cattle did not belong to this man.

"We're taking all these cattle to Yellowrock to put in the inspection pasture," said Scriven importantly. "You can arrange there to git 'em cleared for sale. Come on, take 'em along," he told his companions. "Ride around 'em."

Gail yanked out the carbine she had placed in the wagon box and levered a cartridge into the chamber.

"You keep away from those cattle," she ordered crisply. "Start fooling with those cattle and you'll find yourself in the hottest battle you ever saw. Those deputy badges are no good here. This is across the county line. You men ride out and keep riding."

Scriven, shocked by the girl's resistance, at first looked astonished. Then he scowled and his hand fell to the six-shooter.

Poke Battles let out a loud yell and the barrel of his rifle appeared over the rocks behind which he lay. Two more rifle barrels, those of his boys, showed a little distance away. Then Teft's, Ma Battles' and Bowers' guns appeared which, with Gail's carbine, all but ringed in the four riders.

"Keep your hands off your guns, you polecats," bawled Poke Battles, "or we'll start shooting and dump you outa them saddles like you was sacks of potatoes. Git!"

"You're going agin the law," blustered Scriven. "They hung some rustlers from the mine hoist gallows in Yellowrock a few weeks ago, and them gallows is just yearning to dangle another crop of rustler fruit."

Gail sensed that Scriven was weakening, that he wasn't going to call her bluff.

"You ride out of here," she insisted firmly.

"We'll be back!" Scriven shouted as he turned his horse. "With twenty men to take care of you miscreants. And your skirts won't protect you," he warned the girl. "If you got any real skirts to wear."

Then, with his three companions, he rode down the river at a lope.

"We can't rest here after all," sighed Gail after the Battles family, Lon Teft and Old Man Bowers had gathered about the wagon. "We got to be moving out. You were right, Mr. Bowers. But where can I go?"

Lon Teft spoke up. "There's a valley up this river, a sort of a pocket, with only one way in or out for cattle. Nobody is there now and it's in the same county as this, so Scriven would have no legal right to bother you. And it wouldn't be hard to protect your cattle

in that place."

"I think Lon's idea is good," said Bowers. "I know that little walled valley. Good pasture, and like Lon says you can defend 'em there easy, and meanwhile see what you can do to sell 'em."

Gail nodded. "We'll start right away. And tomorrow I'll go to Yellowrock and try to find Uncle Starr."

The mules were again hitched to the wagon, and Ma Battles started driving up the river. Old Man Bowers volunteered to go along. He and Lon Teft had been riding out aimlessly when they had run across the Camlin herd. Lon Teft said he would return to Yellowrock to keep watch on developments there. He seemed anxious to leave and went out on a lope.

Gail and the others followed with the cattle, trailing along the grassy banks of the river, climbing steadily until they came to the walls of a narrow canyon carved in some ancient lava flow.

The going was rougher here and Ma had to use all her skill to dodge huge boulders, while the wagon wheels pounded over smaller rocks like shots from a gun.

Then, queerly, the canyon ended, and beyond thickets of dead brush they saw a walled valley. The valley was shaped like a bottle with the narrow canyon serving as a long neck, and precipitous volcanic cliffs rising all around it. There was grass everywhere and a scattering of pines. Certainly this little valley with a small creek running through it had all the advantages named by Lon Teft for defense against grafting inspectors.

To Gail, riding in with the wagon ahead of the herd, the little refuge seemed like the palm of a friendly hand stretched to welcome pilgrims. So it appeared, until Gail suddenly discovered one big drawback. There were already cattle in the valley, bunches of them grazing in a little cove at the upper end.

III

MA BATTLES stopped the wagon. "We ain't alone here," she said, disappointed. "What cows is them, I wonder? This'd sure be a good hole-out for rustlers."

Gail agreed. Along the trail there had been a lot of talk of rustlers in the Yellowrock country. For a moment she suspected even that Old Man Bowers and Lon Teft might have plotted to bring her cattle to a place where they would be at the mercy of their rustler pals. Then she put that aside. Teft was a stock detective, and back home Old Man Bowers had a reputation as an honest buyer of small bunches of cattle, they had to be square.

Gail halted her horse to look at the scattered cattle. Twilight had already come into the little natural-walled pasture. No one was in sight, but in the air was the odor of drifting woodsmoke. The fire furnishing that smoke apparently had been put out. Then a horse whickered from a stand of thick young pines to the left, and from the pines came a single rider on a blue roan horse.

Gail examined the horseman closely as he jogged toward them, a young fellow in his early twenties, armed with a six-shooter and a rifle in a saddle scabbard. A chill breeze blew down off the higher mountains, but it was no more chill just then than Gail's anticipations. The rider looked to Gail to be the reckless kind who might easily go in for rustling. When he got closer, her suspicions grew stronger. An arrogant, self-assured sort, this cowboy, and he grinned now as if seeing a girl in a saddle at this spot was just too blasted amusing for words.

"Who's in charge of these cattle coming in?" he demanded sharply as he reined up. "I want to know what he means driving cattle in here."

"Happens I'm in charge," Gail stated, "And I'm asking right back why you've got cattle in here? I understood this valley was empty."

"It was until we came," he said pointedly. "And seeing it empty, we figured we'd use it as pasture a while. Since we were here first, and your herd will mix with ours and it'll be a job to cut them

out again, it's no more than right that you should turn around and head right out again."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Gail told him. "But we've gone far enough today and here's where we camp. If you don't mind," she added ironically.

"Guess it won't be any harm for you to stay," he admitted reluctantly. "As long as it's just for one night and no longer than that."

Gail had been afraid before that she would have a nest of rustlers for neighbors, but now this young fellow's hostility and brass infuriated her more than she cared to tell.

"Thank you," she said in a tone that did everything but thank him, "for nothing," she added sweetly.

"Don't mention it," he returned. "There's a good camp place up-creek, and we can keep our cattle apart during the night. Tomorrow you can find a pasture where you can be alone. Or maybe you'll want to take your cattle into Yellowrock to sell them. If you've got an ironclad title to them. My name is Kirby Grant. And now I'll show you your camping place, Miss—"

"Miss Camlin," she said frigidly. Thought she was utterly incapable of picking out her own camping place, did he, after she had been doing that for many weeks. But he had turned, waving his hand to Ma Battles to follow him. The wagon rumbled on to halt at a little grassy spot near some dead trees which would provide convenient firewood.

"We killed a beef tonight," he told Ma Battles as she halted the team. "Meat's a little fresh yet, but we'll bring over a quarter for you."

Two other men had come out of the pines now, to ride down. Both were old-timers, bearded, and in Gail's opinion, hard lookers. The same reckless sort as Grant.

"What is this, Kirby—a bunch of lady trail drivers?" Gail heard one of the men ask.

" 'Pears to be," the young fellow admitted.

THE CAMPFIRE in the pines which had been put out at the approach of the second herd flamed up again, and Gail saw two other men near it. With Kirby Grant and the two old-timers, that made five men.

The old-timers had made friends with Ma and one was splitting wood for a fire, while the other unhitched the team and hobbled them out. Gail's cattle were stringing out of the canyon, through the thickets of dead brush, and she went down to turn them across the creek. There was no trouble in bedding them down. They had grazed their fill along the Yellowrock and were leg weary.

The two other riders, middle-aged fellows, and the young fellow, Kirby Grant, rode down, maybe to look over the herd to see if it was worth stealing.

"Look at em, Kirby," said one of the riders as the herd bedded down. "She's got 'em trained to lay down just like a bunch of milk cows in a pen."

Gail sniffed scornfully. They were jealous, that was all, because she had brought the herd safely across long stretches of desert. Men's dignity was hurt at seeing women doing men's work successfully.

Grant rode over to Gail. "Nice cattle," he remarked. "Raise 'em yourself?"

"Some of them," she said coldly. "From a bottle, of course."

This Kirby Grant made her mad, every word he said. Leaving him, she rode back to camp, to which one of the Grant crew lugged a quarter of beef. Hanging it on a tree, he began cutting off steaks.

Old Man Bowers arrived with Poke Battles and suddenly identified one of the oldish cowboys.

"Blue Lake!" he exclaimed. "You old horse thief, how'd you ever dodge being hung all this time?"

"Long Rope Bowers!" returned Blue Lake. "How'd you break out of the pen?"

It seemed that the two came from adjoining counties in Texas, and with Texans that was enough to give Mr. Lake and Mr. Bowers enough subjects

for several weeks' conversation.

Ma hospitably invited the Grant crew for supper. They accepted, bringing a pair of Dutch ovens for steaks and bread making. Together the two crews made a hilarious meal of it, but Gail saw nothing to be hilarious over. If these five weren't plain cow thieves, she missed her guess.

She took Old Man Bowers aside as soon as possible and asked his opinion of them.

"I dunno," he said. "Blue Lake was purty wild as a young fellow, and had to leave Texas one dark night in a hurry. These others look sort of uncurried too, and their young boss, he looks wildest of all. He's a heller. Lemme tell you what happened in Yellowrock yesterday.

"The Scriven inspectors got after him, was going to arrest him, and he hit Scriven 'fore Dike could draw a gun and rode out of there with all three shooting at him. Cool hombre, too. He circled back after the firing started to pick up his six-shooter from in front of Marshal Grudd's office. Everyone's saying he offered to sell cattle to Heyden and Gormack and all but admitted they was stole. Anyway, they have some information that makes it pretty evident that Grant's a rustler. He's a wild young 'un. Better watch him."

"I will," Gail promised grimly. "I'll do just that, you bet."

After they had eaten, one man from each crew went out to ride the creek between the two bunches of cattle. Gail was going to make certain that Kirby Grant's bunch didn't slip a few of her cattle out during the night.

It was late when all the Grant crew but Kirby went back to their camp. The Battles family retired to their beds. With Old Man Bowers riding night herd, Gail found herself alone with Kirby Grant.

Looking at the girl sitting against a wagon wheel with her dark blue glowing eyes alive, the firelight shining over her face and slim person and making a golden halo of her hair, seemed to make Kirby Grant restless. He had been talking and laughing with the others all evening, but now his lean, deeply tanned face turned grave. He did not approve of her or her venture, Gail sensed.

AFTER A WHILE, he said, "I might as well tell you that you're in bad company. The brand inspectors at Yellowrock claim that the cattle I've driven in are stolen. It's only fair to warn you."

"That's odd," she returned. "Some inspectors came out today to look at my cattle and claimed they'd been stolen too. It's only fair to warn you," she added mockingly.

"The inspectors came out to see your cattle? What did you do?"

"We asked them to go back to Yellowrock."

"Just like that, eh?" he said softly. "So that's what Poke was talking about. I heard him say something about bluffing some bunch with a show of guns. You're up against a gang of killers. A bunch that will have honest men hung if necessary to get them out of the way. That mining town is plain bad medicine for cattlemen. I know you didn't steal your cattle, but that won't do you any good. You'd better move them out of this country, and do it quick."

"If you want to get rid of us," observed Gail, "an easy way would be for you to take your cattle down into Yellowrock and sell them."

"Ma'am," he said, "I'd like to do that. But there's been so much stolen stuff brought into Yellowrock, seems that they're paying nothing for cattle. I'm waiting for a better market, after they get all the rustlers taken care of."

He was a cool one certainly, this Kirby Grant, after he had admitted in town, according to Mr. Bowers, that he had stolen the herd he was driving.

"I'm serious," he went on. "You don't know how dangerous a game you're playing. This is no country for a girl. You've got as much business with those cattle as I'd have with a sewing machine. You waltzing into a tough country like this shows a plain lack of judgment."

"Who asked you what it shows or for

your opinion either?" Gail inquired tartly. "I'll make out somehow. I really own my cattle and I expect to have no trouble selling my stock in Yellowrock."

He shrugged. "I'd like to make a small bet on that. You're already in trouble with the inspectors. You won't be safe, Miss Camlin."

"I'm willing to risk that," she stated. "I'll find some way. One thing I'd like to ask. Why are you so interested in my cattle, Mr. Grant?"

A little darker tinge came to his face. "I see," he said quietly. "Since you think I'm a rustler, I guess you wouldn't let me help you. Not that I could give much help anyway, even if you were the sort that would take it."

"That's about it," she said. "It's every one for himself in this country."

He headed back to his camp, and when the jingle of his spurs died away, she went to her tarp-covered bedroll and spread it. The night was still quiet, with the cattle making a dim cluster of dark blots on the moonlit little bench where they had bedded down.

She took off her boots, but otherwise slipped fully dressed between her bed blankets. She was tired, but too worried to sleep. She had heard too many warnings about herds disappearing in this country without a trace. Nor did she trust Kirby Grant and his hard-looking crew.

She was also worried about her uncle, who had promised to ride back to meet the trail drive. Starr Camlin was not like her father, Charles Camlin. Starr was the gambler type. Starr's wife had been left at home with two small children. Even if something had happened to Starr, the money the B-in-a-Box cattle should bring would insure his wife and children a fair sum.

Darkness shut down as the moon swung over the valley wall, and she dozed off. She was to ride the last guard from three o'clock to daybreak. Then she came awake abruptly to see someone moving around in the shadows near the wagon.

She grabbed the carbine under her tarp. "Stop," she ordered, "or I'll fire! Who is it?"

"Me, ma'am, your neighbor," came Kirby Grant's voice. "Don't make a fuss. There's a bunch of riders that sneaked into the valley, a dozen men or so. I don't know if they're wanting your herd or mine, but likely both. I just came to bring you a warning so you can get back to a safe place. Liable to be lead flying around."

She didn't know whether to believe him or not. "Are you sure they're rustlers?" she asked.

"I forgot to ask em," he replied. "Maybe they think they own some of the cattle in your herd and have come snooping around to find out if you're taking good care of them."

WHAT HAPPENED then momentarily made the girl want to flee into the pines. For it seemed that a least a hundred men began yelling and shooting, charging down the valley, part of them toward Kirby's herd, part toward hers, plainly intending to stampede the cattle.

"Get to cover!" yelled Kirby and ran back to his camp.

Instead of getting to cover, Gail raced to her picketed night horse and, joined by Poke Battles and his two boys, headed out into the valley. Already the cattle, panic-stricken by the yells and firing, were on the move.

Kirby and his crew were riding out to meet and turn the stampeding cattle. Dimly Gail could see their horses dash through the creek, throwing water high. Old Man Bowers was yelling wildly and riding hard trying to keep the Camlin herd against the wall of the valley. She joined them and shortly the Battles trio arrived, but it was useless. Already some of the Kirby Grant herd were galloping down to mingle with Gail's cattle, taking them along in a wild flight. Two horsemen came pounding up—Kirby Grant and one of his crew.

"We can't hold the cattle!" Kirby shouted. "Those polecats will run them out through the canyon. I've got a bet-

ter idea. Get to cover, all of you. Those buzzards aren't shooting in earnest yet, but they soon will be."

The pair dashed away, while the heavy roll of the guns continued to make a thunder in the valley. Ignoring Kirby's order, Gail and the others rode desperately, trying to swing the stampeding cattle back up the valley.

She had no time to observe what Kirby and the other man were trying; she was too busy. So far none of the raiders had come close, but the reports of their guns and their yells were traveling nearer.

She could see that it was useless to try to hold the cattle. Twenty cowboys could not have stopped the terrified animals. Then Old Man Bowers, galloping in close, shouted to Gail to look below. A quick glance showed little flames near the entrance of the canyon.

"Smart lad, that Grant," said Bowers.

Kirby's plan was apparent now—to start a line of fire in the dead brush and grass which stretched across the valley end of the canyon. It was a better scheme certainly than trying to hold the herd on horseback. Evidently the rustlers thought so too, for Gail heard a stentorian voice bellow, "Git down and cut down whoever's trying to start them fires!"

Hoofs pounded, and three men belonging to the rider gang flashed by riding toward Kirby and his cowboy. They stirred Gail into a desire for more effective action than just riding. She had kept her carbine in her scabbard, since there was as yet no actual exchange of shots between the raiders and herders. Now she yanked the rifle from its leather case and spurred her horse in pursuit of the shadowy trio.

A few moments later she opened fire from her saddle, emptying the Winchester. One of the horses of the three went down, and the other two men separated, riding to the side to return Gail's fire. She swerved her horse into the shadow of the valley wall to reload.

Poke Battles and some of the Grant crew were racing to help her. They had the advantage of the trio, who were outlined in the glowing glare of the dozen flames speeding together now to make a solid line. The crackling of the burning brush mounted to a roar and billowed smoke.

The raiders made one last desperate effort to drive at least part of the herds into the canyon, but the barricade of flame turned the tide of stampeding animals. The attackers rode back up the valley, to leave it by some trail which angled up the precipitous walls. The man Gail had set afoot had climbed up behind the saddle of one of his companions.

Before they left, some of the raiders had ridden past the Camlin camp, sending in a volley of shots. Luckily, Ma Battles had retreated to the slope at the beginning of the raid. None of the herders had been hit, and in all the wild shooting only two cattle had been beefed.

In half an hour the cattle had quieted and the two crews rode up to the Camlin wagon for hot coffee. Ma's wooden laundry tub had been riddled with shots, and several shots had gone through the wagon cover.

"The only tub like it in five hundred miles, I bet," Ma mourned. "And after I brung it all this way. Battles, if you was a man you would take after them varmints and shoot 'em down one by one. How can I wash clothes without that there tub? How are you and the boys going to take baths without it?"

"I wouldn't worry, Ma," airily said Poke. "Soon's I git time to find me a gold mine, I'll buy a solid silver bathtub and heaps of that soap."

Gail, chuckling, turned to see Kirby Grant just dismounting.

"That was a smart trick," she told him. "Starting that fire."

Grant smiled, and the smile seemed to light up his whole face. "It was smarter of you to take after those men coming down on us and knock a horse out from under one of 'em," he returned.

She flushed a little. Nothing apparently got by this fellow's sharp eyes.

IV

MORNING found the valley peaceful under its volcanic walls. The two herds, which had become mixed during the stampede, were grazing quietly. The fire had finally burned out.

Without that fire there would be no cattle left in the valley. The scare Gail had suffered during the night decided her to get rid of her cattle without delay. She would ride to Yellowrock; certainly her uncle was there or had left word. There would be the risk of meeting trouble in the town from Inspector Scriven, but she had to chance that. She decided to go alone. Poke Battles, with his love of gambling, would be no help in town, and Old Man Bowers had already had enough trouble in Yellowrock.

Kirby Grant had suggested putting up a fence at the canyon end, made up of rocks and poles, one strong and high enough to turn stampeding cattle. As Gail headed for Yellowrock early in the morning on her best horse, both crews had begun work building the fence together.

It was an astonishing sight to the girl as she first saw Yellowrock, scattered on the mountain slope with plumes of smoke rising from the tall stacks of smelters, steam-powered stamp mills and mines. Yellowrock looked like a real city which had sprouted incredibly in a sagebrush semi-desert country.

At the head of the main street she came into a stream of moving heavy vehicles, pack trains and men afoot. A stagecoach rumbled past, packed inside and out, and with passengers clinging to the roof like flies. Filling the town was the steady thump-thump of stamp mills, and the occasional reverberating boom of blasts, many of them coming muffledly from underground.

Even before she came into the business center of the town, she began to realize that in a small city like Yellowrock her divided skirt and buckskin jacket, a costume eminently adapted to a cattle drive, might draw notice. She tried to be indifferent to the stares of teamsters and pack mule hazers, but she was already flushing when she was stopped by a long-bearded old sourdough, who took off his battered hat and held up his hand.

"Child," he said earnestly, "this here is no town for you to be a-riding into."

An old lady sprinkling a bed of flowers put down the sprinkling can and, lifting her long black skirts, marched into the house and slammed the door. But even this encounter failed to prepare Gail for the sensation she created in the main part of town.

It was not her garb alone. Gail did not realize how altogether pretty she looked on her mettlesome bay which stepped along mincingly, frightened by the crowded street. She was a novelty in a town which had seen comparatively few women arrive—just miners' wives and the dancehall women in stages. But Yellowrock had never seen a girl enter sitting a stock saddle and carrying a businesslike coiled rope and a scabbarded carbine. She was a refreshing sight to Yellowrock, used to painted ladies, the slatternly wives of miners and a few women whose husbands had struck it rich, enabling their wives and daughters to blossom out in Parisian clothes.

Little wonder that Gail almost stopped the various activities of Yellowrock's street population. They stared in silence and Gail suppressed a wild desire to spur her horse and flee the camp.

She had no time for such maidenly modesties. She had two important things to do here—sell her cattle and locate her uncle.

She asked an oldish miner to direct her to the Bonanza Palace Hotel where Starr Camlin had told her he intended to stay. When he pointed to the ornate four-story brick building, looming above its neighbors, Gail judged that her uncle had not stayed there long. He had lacked the money for such luxury.

GAIL TIED her horse to a rack in front of the hotel and swung down, conscious of her high-heeled boots and

spurs. Yellowrock seemed to be civilization with a vengeance. In some respects it was like San Francisco or any city, but she told herself she'd be danged if she would let it scare her.

She hurried into the hotel, past a uniformed doorman and through a lobby crowded with men clustered before a huge blackboard filled with quotations of mining stocks. The men swung almost as one in answer to nudging elbows of neighbors to watch the girl as she went to the desk. At the end of the lobby was an elevator, a fancy cage just now stopping to let out some men in high silk hats and long broadcloth coats.

"I want to inquire about a Mr. Starr Camlin," she told the man behind the desk.

The clerk, a citified young fellow with a fresh flower in his buttonhole, stared at her garb in stern disapproval, and consulted a file. "Starr Camlin stopped here three weeks ago," he said haughtily. "For one night."

"Did he leave word, a letter perhaps for Miss Gail Camlin?" she inquired.

The clerk languidly consulted a pigeonhole and shook his head. That was that. She went to the post office a few doors away, but there was no letter for her.

In the street again, she hesitated, feeling suddenly forlorn. She had been counting a lot on seeing her uncle, hoping that he had arranged for the sale of their cattle.

As she stood confused, uncertain, a broad-shouldered man with a star on his chest came up and lifted his hat politely. "Can I be of service, miss?" he inquired. "I am Marshal Grudd." His voice was courteous, friendly.

She had heard of Henry Grudd, who had gained fame as a gun marshal of tough towns. To Gail his appearance did not support the stories, except for the twin guns on his hips and his light, cold-looking eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "I am Gail Camlin. I'm looking for my uncle, Starr Camlin. He headed for Yellowrock some weeks ago to arrange to sell some cattle."

"Starr Camlin," Grudd repeated thoughtfully. "There are thousands of men that come and go here. I'm afraid I've never heard of him."

"Also," she said, "I have some cattle to sell. Could you advise me? Some men calling themselves brand inspectors came out yesterday to look at my cattle, and I told them to go back to town. I'd been warned they would steal my cattle if they had the chance."

Grudd smiled a little. "I wouldn't worry about those inspectors. They deal with rather a high hand. I, of course, have nothing to do with them. They have been made deputy sheriffs and claim authority to examine herds of cattle offered for sale here. If they give you any further trouble let me know. But as for selling cattle," he went on, "it will be difficult. The only people who might buy your cattle now are Heyden and Gormack. I'll be glad to take you to their market."

TOGETHER they moved along the walk, with men making way for them, and went into a meat market looking and smelling like a barn that had never been cleaned. The marshal guided her into the office where two men, one lean and gray-eyed, one a bullet-headed husky, sat at a desk. The lean man got to his feet promptly. The other stared at Gail.

"Mr. Heyden," said the marshal, "this is Miss Camlin who wishes to sell a bunch of cattle."

Heyden smiled and bowed.

"You have warned her, I suppose, Marshal," he said, "that we are close buyers. But I'll do the best I can for her."

Grudd left and Heyden pulled out a chair for Gail.

"Now what do you have?" Heyden asked.

She described her cattle, adding that they were fat.

Heyden nodded. "We aren't buying just now, but we might use some of your herd. Maybe all of them. But the meat business is very slow."

She thought of the crowded meat shop

outside and had her reservations about the slowness of the meat business.

"By stretching a point," Heyden went on, "I think we could buy your cattle sight unseen at two cents a pound."

"Two cents!" Gail exclaimed. "Why, I've heard that fat cattle have been selling here for ten cents on the hoof. This is fat beef, ready for the block."

Her heart sank. Two cents would bring less than a fourth of the least she had expected to receive.

"Two cents would be stretching the price just for you, young lady," Heyden said calmly. "I offer it only because I'd like to help you. The inspectors here make us a lot of trouble. They watch the brand of every head of stock we butcher. We've had to buy a lot of cattle twice—once from the rustlers that brought them here and sold them to us, and a second time when the real owners showed up."

"You won't have to buy these cattle twice," Gail told him. "Part were my father's cattle, the rest are the brand he started for me some years ago."

"I don't doubt it," Heyden said smiling. "But inspection fees are high. We'll send out our men to get your cattle today and you can have the money tomorrow morning as soon as they're weighed out here."

Gail rose at once. "No," she said firmly. "I can't sell at so ridiculous a price."

Gail went out again, walking along blindly, fighting back the tears. Her hopes had sunk to zero. Two cents a pound was too ridiculous an offer even to consider. The amount the cattle would bring at that price would barely pay the money friends had advanced to her father. She could have sold them back home for much more.

WALKING along aimlessly, she halted at another meat shop, according to the sign overhead belonging to one Jack Spratt. It was empty of stock and customers, but looking through the windows, she thought that this was a meat market to which it would be a pleasure to sell cattle. A plumpish man clothed entirely in white, even to a white cap, was talking to another man in front of the door.

"I tell you I can't pay a cent," the white-clad man was saying. "But if you let me take these fixtures back to San Francisco, I could pay you all the back rent in two months. I have a lot of customers there who know me. It's not my fault that I can't buy cattle," said the butcher.

"No, but it's your hard luck," said the other man indifferently and walked away.

Gail went up to Mr. Spratt. "Did I understand you to say that you can't buy cattle?"

He turned to look at her, his blue eyes widening in surprise. "That is right, miss."

"It was right," she corrected him. "I'm offering you good fat cattle, and at a fair price."

"I was paying eleven cents a pound for cattle," said Spratt. "But no cattle are to be had now and anyway I have no money to buy. Some cattle I paid for Inspector Scriven said were stolen stuff, and they took the cattle and I was out my money. This town is no place for an honest butcher. It's run by crooks."

A daring idea came to Gail.

"Look here," she said, "you want to sell beef and I want to sell cattle. I'll bring in my cattle for you to slaughter and sell, and you pay for them as you get the money."

Jack Spratt shook his head. "No, I'm through here. There's too much to fight in Yellowrock. I'm broke. The men that control the butcher business in this town, Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack, they have too much money and too much influence. The inspectors work with them so they can get cattle for nothing. But don't tell anyone I said that."

"The inspectors can't bother my cattle. I have tax receipts and other papers to prove I own them. Part were my father's and I have a copy of my father's will leaving them to me, also the court papers

settling the estate. The other cattle I own myself in a brand registered in my name. No inspectors will dare bother you."

Mr. Spratt shook his head regretfully. "It's no use," he said. "They'd get us some way."

Gail looked at him and her eyes glinted. "Mr. Spratt, you've eaten a lot of beef in your life, haven't you?"

He chuckled. "Tons of it. You can see that by looking at me."

"And all that beef you ate, it all went to fat, did it?" asked Gail. "None of it went to backbone?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "That I have no courage?"

"Have you enough to become partners with me? The inspectors wanted to take my cattle yesterday afternoon. We chased them off. Last night the rustlers jumped my herd and tried to run them off. I can guess what we're up against, but I'll bring down ten head today, and tomorrow you'll open your nice clean market again. Half to me for my cattle; half to you for slaughtering and selling the beef. We'll give Heyden and Gormack a fight. If you've got enough nerve to sell meat!"

Mr. Spratt bridled. "Folks come a long ways to buy Jack Spratt's beef because they know he sells only the best," he boasted. "The Bonanza Palace Hotel bought all their meat from me as long as I was in business. I could sell ten beeves a day easy. But it wouldn't work. You're only a girl. They'd stop us. Those inspectors are deputy sheriffs and we can't fight them."

"Those inspectors are just bluffing. Heyden and Gormack's whole business is mostly founded on bluff. We'll do a little fighting ourselves."

Jack Spratt looked at her, and then the wrinkles in his face began to widen. He laughed suddenly, the hearty kind of laugh that is good to hear.

"Fight them, she tells me," he said. "A little girl tells me that. But maybe you're right. We've nothing to lose. You bring ten head to my slaughterhouse on the river. I'll butcher them tonight after dark, and before Heyden, Gormack and the inspectors know anything about it we'll be selling meat. We won't last long," he predicted, "but we'll give Heyden and Gormack a whale of a fight."

PREPARING to return to camp after having bought a few necessities and a present for Ma Battles and the two boys, Gail, passing the Bonanza Palace Hotel, ran suddenly into Inspector Dike Scriven.

Scriven stared and grabbed her arm. She dodged him and backed against the hotel front. The long-necked Scriven stepped forward, his mean face drawn in a snarl.

"All right," he half shouted. "I got you. Come along, you're under arrest."

"Got a warrant, Scriven?" asked a quiet voice. Scriven swung. Marshal Grudd stood a few feet way.

"I'm taking in this girl for resisting officers yesterday," said Scriven.

A ghost of a smile crossed Grudd's face. "You want to make that kind of a charge, do you, Dike? That a girl backed you and your pals down?"

"She had help. Had a regular army, but she was the boss. Told us to go about our business or they'd shoot."

"But it's her you want to arrest?" Grudd asked.

"Yeah. She done the threatening. She ordered us to leave her cattle alone. And I'm arresting her."

"I think not," stated Grudd quietly. "I make the arrests in this town. If you want her arrested, ask me to do it."

"Why sure, Marshal," agreed Scriven, calming a little. "I'm asking you to arrest her. I'll swear out a warrant."

Grudd grinned again and the grin seemed to touch off a little explosion of laughter behind Scriven's back. The inspector glanced over his shoulder. At least a dozen men had crowded in.

"I'm to understand, Dike," went on Grudd as the laughter died, "that you're asking me to arrest this girl for you, being that you were unable to do it yourself yesterday?"

The laughter came again, in a roar this time from men who looked from the tall Scriven to the slim young girl standing opposite him. Scriven realized Grudd had tricked him into asking the marshal to arrest a girl. He crimsoned with rage.

"If I were you, Dike," went on Grudd, "I'd forget what happened yesterday. We don't want to bother a girl that had the nerve to drive a bunch of cattle all the way to Yellowrock. You don't want to be accusing this girl of stealing cattle either. Someone might call you to account for it, Scriven."

Scriven left, muttering to himself, and the incident was closed. But Gail knew the inspector would be an even bitterer enemy than he had been before.

Returning to the camp, she found the men finishing the fence across the canyon exit from the walled valley. Kirby Grant had been working with the rest. "What luck did you have?" he inquired as she pulled up beside him.

"Fine," she told him. "I found a market for my cattle and I think I'll be able to get rid of all my stock at a good price."

"You were lucky," he said. "But be sure that you aren't tricked out of getting paid for your cattle. That town is run by crooks."

She hesitated. He wasn't asking her to tell him anything about her deal, and there was no reason why she should, since report had it that Kirby was a confessed rustler.

In spite of that, Gail felt an impulse to tell him what she had done. He had saved her herd the night before. Maybe Spratt could use his cattle, too, if they were cattle that really were his.

"The buyer is a man named Jack Spratt," she explained.

Kirby was surprised. "I talked to him, but he said he didn't have any money to buy."

"I offered to go into partnership with him—to let him slaughter my cattle to sell as beef in his market. I'm taking ten head down to his slaughterhouse this evening."

Grant grinned. "I take my hat off to you, Miss Camlin. If you need any help with those cattle, I'm riding in to Yellowrock tonight. Or maybe," he added lightly, "you don't think it would be

Romantic Ripples

It's probably pardonable if Denver men like to believe they are somewhat more desirable in feminine eyes than they were 10 years ago. For every 100 women in the Colorado Capital, there are now only 93 men. In 1940, the ratio was 96 men to 100 women.

Corinne Goodnight married Charles Goodnight in Goodnight, Tex.

Judge Hart, St. Ferdinant, Mo., has married more than 60,000 couples—although a bachelor himself.

In an Idaho town, Alice Apple married Paul Peel.

A teen-age romance interrupted by a lovers' quarrel was renewed in Fort Worth, Tex., with the marriage of a bride of 70 to a bridegroom of the same age.

Despite all the talk about Reno being such a divorce capital, for every 86 divorces there, 1000 marriages take place.

By Harold Helfer

smart to be associated with a man that might be a rustler, with a good chance of swinging on the Yellowrock gallows?"

She flushed. "I'll be glad to have you go with us. But you shouldn't joke about such things as gallows. That Gallows Hill in Yellowrock is an ugly thing."

"Ugly, yes," he admitted. "And what they've done there is uglier. A gallows built under the law is bad enough. That Miners' Court gallow should be burned."

Old Man Bowers offered to make a third in taking the little bunch of cattle to the river.

V

IN THE afternoon, ten steers wearing her own brand, GC Slash, were cut out and Gail, Bowers and Kirby Grant started them through a narrow opening left in the barricade closing the canyon exit from the valley.

Without trouble they came to the Spratt slaughterhouse on the river, reaching it after dark as Spratt advised. The slaughterhouse was painted white inside and out. Even the corrals were whitewashed. Spratt and four butchers were waiting. In a clean pen of the corrals, animals were killed and the carcasses hoisted on a chain to be carried inside the slaughterhouse. There, after the hide had been removed, the carcasses were cut up into quarters and placed in a wagon for hauling to the meat market coolers.

Kirby had some business in Yellowrock, he declared, and after the cattle had been corralled, he rode off toward the town.

Jack Spratt and his men prepared to get to work. Spratt was nervous, fearing trouble from Heyden and Gormack, who might have gotten wind that their rival butcher was preparing to slaughter cattle again.

Like Jack Spratt, Gail was uneasy. She didn't like the secrecy of the night slaughtering. It made it appear as if they were killing stolen stock. As the crash of the rifle sounded the doom of the first steer, she tied her horse and with her carbine went back to sit down in the brush a little way from the river. Old Man Bowers had wandered up the Yellowrock road, carrying a rifle. If trouble occurred, that would be the direction from which it would come.

SITTING quietly in the brush with her carbine across her knees, Gail listened and suddenly became alert. Then gravel crunched a little under the boots of some man coming down the Yellowrock road. She was about to raise her voice to call to him, taking it to be Bowers, but some caution kept her silent.

She was glad the next moment that she had not called out, for the man who slipped into the trees close to the slaughterhouse was not Bowers but someone who had come past the old rancher. Gail remembered now a disturbed twittering of some birds up the road and guessed that Bowers might have met disaster.

Getting to her feet, she followed the man who was slipping through the trees, moving nearer the abattoir where the men were now working, having slaughtered several of the beeves. Walking cautiously, treading silently over a yellow carpet of fallen leaves, she was not twenty feet from the man when he came to the side door of the abattoir. Then pushing it open suddenly, he stood revealed in the yellow light of the doorway, a six-shooter in his right hand. Over his face was a mask made of a bandanna.

"Hands up, all of you!" he called. "Well, just look at them nice fat beeves. We can use them."

He was a sneering sort, with a squeaky voice, and from his voice and general build, Gail was certain he was one of the butchers who had stepped into the Heyden and Gormack office during her visit.

Gail came up behind the man who still stood in the doorway. The metallic sound the rifle made as the girl cocked it behind his back made the fellow start and then stiffen.

"Drop your gun!" Gail ordered with a sincerity that was unmistakable. "Quick or I'll shoot."

"I never yet turned down a favor a lady asked me," said the masked man, raising his voice to an unnatural loudness. Gail guessed why. It was for the benefit of companions who must be close.

But before she could act on that guess and turn, some man had come up from behind her to grab her carbine, turning the barrel to the sky just before the rifle exploded.

There was a rush of feet as she struggled vainly to get the weapon free. Three men wearing masks dashed past and into the abattoir, all with guns in their hands, and backed Spratt and the four other butchers against the suspended carcasses.

A blow from the elbow of the man during the struggle made Gail's head swim. Releasing her grip on the rifle, she reeled and fell to her knees. The fellow who had taken down her rifle jerked her to her feet and shoved her inside the door among the butchers. Spratt reached out a steadying hand and she stood waveringly.

She was facing the front door which was partly open, and what she saw then made her gasp.

Kirby Grant had come through the door and stood inside the big room, in the shadows outside the range of the lanterns and unseen by the masked raiders. In his hand was a Frontier Model Colt.

KIRBY GRANT'S job, Gail realized, was a difficult one. He was one man against five who were scattered about the poorly lighted room.

So far, however, the faint light had been a help. Due to it, none of the masked men saw Kirby as he maneuvered slowly a few steps to the left, moving deeper into the shadows. There, still unobserved by any of the five holdups, he suddenly whipped out a command.

"Freeze, you hooded snakes! Freeze, if you don't want a dose of lead poison."

The masked marauders stiffened in the positions they happened to be in when Kirby's voice first sounded.

"Drop your guns, all of you," he ordered. "Let 'em fall—quick. The last one holding a iron, I'll shoot his gun out of his hand."

The quintet obeyed that order too, with little hesitation. Just now there was a granite quality to Kirby's ordinarily soft voice that made men jump to obey. That voice hinted the owner was so eager to shoot that he needed only half an excuse to pull a trigger.

"Now back up!" he told the men. "Get under those lanterns where I can see you."

Slowly the five backed under the lanterns, and Gail, who had watched breathlessly, was feeling safer. But suddenly the man who had first come to the abattoir to start the holdup seemed to stumble. He was but a few feet from Gail and the girl could see, as he fell, that his right hand was darting under his jacket, evidently to whip out a six-shooter from a shoulder holster.

She cried out a warning and stepped forward, but the roar of Kirby's six-shooter cut her cry short. The man, hit in the right shoulder, fell to the ground and lay face down, groaning with pain.

Another of the masked men, taking advantage of this momentary confusion, hastily stepped to the side intending to flee through an open door. Jack Spratt, however, saw this move and promptly collared the man and flung him against the side of the slaughterhouse, so hard that the fellow was knocked unconscious. The other three meekly backed against the wall under the lanterns where one of the Spratt butchers stepped forward to pat the trio over for hidden weapons. Finding none, he tore the masks from their faces.

Two were identified as having been in the recent employ of Heyden and Gormack. The other man was the one who, by calling himself Pryor, had claimed ownership of the B-in-a-Box cattle. When the man with the punctured shoulder was unmasked he proved to be one of the butchers who had only that

day worked in the Heyden and Gormack meat market. Gail had been correct in identifying this man by his squeaky voice. The fifth man was a saloon hanger-on.

"Just as I thought," said Jack Spratt. "Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack pulled this."

Gail nodded. What was more important, however, than finding out who was behind the attempted robbery was to find Old Man Bowers. It seemed certain that he had been put out of the way before the attack.

Leaving the men under the guard of Jack Spratt and his butchers, Kirby and Gail took a lantern and went up the road to search for the old rancher. They soon found him lying in a thicket near the river, trussed hand and foot and gagged. He had been slugged over the head, very likely with a gun barrel. Freed, he soon recovered sufficiently to get dazedly to his feet.

Farther on up the road Kirby found a wagon and team. The vehicle evidently had brought the five men from Yellowrock and was to have taken away the stolen beef.

AFTER helping Bowers into the wagon, Kirby and Gail climbed in and drove to the slaughterhouse. There Jack Spratt had bandaged the injured man's shoulder. All five prisoners kept a tight-lipped, sullen silence. Neither threats nor promises could persuade them to confess who had engaged them for the robbery.

"They figure their bosses will have 'em turned loose," Spratt said, disgusted. "And Heyden and Gormack will do just that."

"But isn't there any protection against thugs like these men?" Gail demanded.

"Not outside of town," said Spratt. "Grudd claims he's hired only to keep order in Yellowrock, and Sheriff Dawes is seventy miles away at the county seat and lets these camps run themselves. Dawes gets over to Yellowrock only about once in two weeks. Says he's got no money to hire deputies to enforce law in these mine camps."

He turned to Kirby. "You're a mighty cool hombre to put the kibosh on these five. And you sure saved our bacon—or beef. Thought you headed for Yellowrock. How'd you happen to come back?"

"Ran into a man in Yellowrock I know, Lon Teft. Told me he'd overheard talk in a saloon about a raid to steal some meat from a packing house along the river. It wasn't hard to guess yours was the one they meant and I rode back over the ridge."

"That Lon Teft," remarked Old Man Bowers with a chuckle, "is the dangdest feller I ever did see to hear things. He's so cussed friendly with everyone that he learns about everything that goes on in the country."

"Yes," agreed Kirby quietly, "Lon is a friendly felow all right."

Spratt and his butchers hurriedly finished their job of slaughtering the steers. When they were done both the wagon they had brought and the captured one were used to transport the carcasses and the prisoners.

It was past midnight when Spratt, Gail, Bowers and Kirby took the prisoners down to the jail in the captured wagon. The night marshal was unwilling to accept the prisoners and Grudd, who had a room in the Bonanza Palace Hotel, was sent for. The marshal arrived and listened in his stolid way to the story Gail and Spratt told him.

"What happens outside Yellowrock is none of my business," he declared, "but I'll hold 'em for the night. Sheriff Dawes is due in tomorrow, and it'll be up to him whether he wants to take them over to the county seat jail or not. It's not likely he'll be interested in a little meat-stealing job."

Later, Kirby and Bowers prepared to ride back to the valley, but Gail had decided to stay in the Bonanza Palace.

"I want to be here to watch the sale of this beef," she explained. "And to make sure that Heyden and Gormack and those Scriven inspectors don't interfere."

"Good idea," Kirby agreed. "But I'm betting those crooks have tried all they're going to for a while. Talking themselves out of engineering this holdup is going to keep Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack busy."

In the early morning Gail dressed and, skipping breakfast, hurried to the Jack Spratt market. What she saw there was highly satisfying. Buyers literaly filled the store, while Jack Spratt, one great grin from ear to ear, toiled with half a dozen butchers, cutting meat on the battery of blocks and weighing purchases on the sets of shining brass scales. Jack Spratt opened the cash drawer to show it already half full of stacks of silver coins and a few of gold.

"We're going to get rich, pardner," he predicted. "If those polecats only leave us alone."

He waved his hands to the schedule of prices for various cuts posted on the wall. "Those prices mean a big profit for us, but they make what the Heyden and Gormack Market charge look like highway robbery. Our prices for the best cuts are what they charge for their cheapest."

She stayed to help, acting as cashier. More customers crowded in filling the market to the doors, patiently waiting their turns at the counters.

FOR AN hour they were busy, then there sounded a loud altercation in the street. Spratt took Gail through a side door to the front of the establishment where Inspector Dike Scriven, with Heyden and Gormack, were arguing angrily with Marshal Grudd. In the crowd, evidently an interested listener, was the tall stock detective, Lon Teft, with his mustache freshly curled and looking dudish in a new silk shirt and a pair of close-fitting breeches.

"I tell you it's stolen meat!" Gormack was bellowing loudly. "Meat butchered without inspection. Dike Scriven here has to pass on all cattle butchered for sale in Yellowrock. Spratt didn't have them cattle he's selling in there inspected first."

"Me, I heard they was inspected," put in Lon Teft in his jovial voice. "Five masked inspectors of Scriven's was sent down to inspect those cattle and they passed 'em."

Men standing nearby, hearing this sally, laughed, and Dike Scriven, his face red with anger, swung on Teft.

"Keep out of my affairs," he bawled. "No one is going to accuse me even in a joking way of being with that holdup."

Teft laughed sneeringly. "One of them five holdups was sure associating with you just a couple of days ago when you tried to grab Miss Gail's herd."

Marshal Grudd was listening in his silent way, then saw Gail and lifted his hat. "What have you to say, Miss Camlin?" asked Grudd. "These men accuse you and Spratt of selling beef from stolen cattle."

"I say they're lying," said Gail flatly. "And I'm saying back at Heyden and Gormack that it was their men who jumped us last night to try to steal the cattle Mr. Spratt was slaughtering. You know about that, Marshal. Those men are in your jail now."

Grudd shook his head. "They were there. Sheriff Dawes came a while ago and turned 'em loose. Said the case wasn't serious enough to justify the expense of taking 'em to the county seat to hold for trial. Can you prove, Miss Camlin, that the meat being sold here is from cattle belonging to you?"

"Absolutely," Gail snapped and pulled out a packet of papers. "We have the hides of the steers killed last night showing the GC Slash brand. And I have papers here to show that same brand was registered in my name years ago. If anyone wants to inspect the hides and the papers, they're welcome to do it."

Grudd chuckled. "Looks as if your case isn't very strong, gentlemen," he told the complaining three.

"That's putting it mild, Marshal Grudd," shouted Lon Teft. "Miss Camlin has plumb hamstrung Heyden and Gormack and you too, Scriven, with your phony inspection graft."

Gormack's eyes were baleful as he glared at Teft and then at the girl. "You listen, all of you!" he shouted, only to

stop as his partner, Heyden, nudged him.

"You were about to say, Señor Gormack?" Teft asked impudently.

"I was about to say this!" yelled Gormack. "That some day all of you will find yourselves swinging from that." He pointed up at the gaunt frame of the lynching gallows on its hill of barren yellow earth.

"We want to talk this over with you privately, Marshal," put in Heyden suavely. "Let's go down to your office."

The group moved off and Jack Spratt hurried indoors to wait on customers.

"I congratulate you," Lon Teft said to Gail, smiling down on her. "Going into partnership with Spratt, are you, to sell your cattle? You're the only one that ever found a way to lick Heyden and Gormack. All of us cattlemen with stock to sell in Yellowrock can take a tip from you."

"I didn't know you had cattle to sell here," remarked Gail. "I thought you were a stock detective."

Lon Teft laughed. "I was just speaking for the cattlemen I represent. Me, I don't own nothing but a horse. But if you need help in fighting these Heyden and Gormack buzzards, I know where to find some men with guns to do it. Me, of course, I'd be one. If Kirby Grant had told me last night he was heading to help you, I'd have gone with him. Kirby wanted to hog all the glory himself, I guess. But Kirby, he's always been a great ladies' man. All his life."

"You've known Kirby all your life?" asked Gail.

"Have I?" Lon Teft's hearty laughter rang out and he seemed vastly amused. "Sure, I've known Kirby very very well—a great ladies' man and a slick one. Busts hearts like he busts broncs."

Gail somehow felt disappointed at hearing this. So Kirby, besides probably being a rustler, was also a heartbreaker.

It was time for her to be riding back to the valley for another bunch of cattle to take to the Spratt slaughterhouse. After a few words with Spratt, she went to get her horse from the livery stable, stopping by the marshal's office on the way. Grudd had got rid of Inspector Scriven and Heyden and Gormack. He was standing on the sidewalk in front of the jail, watching the street.

"I sent 'em about their business," he told her. "I want you to know that whatever you say about your cattle, Miss Gail, I believe. And anything I can do to help you, count on me for it."

"I will," Gail said.

"You were asking about your uncle, Starr Camlin," he went on. "I had word that a man by that name was working a claim on Jack's Creek, a week ago. That's thirty miles from here. I sent over a message by a friend that if Camlin is still there, he's to be told his niece has arrived in Yellowrock."

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "It's important that I see him soon."

A few moments later she was riding out with Old Man Bowers, heading back to the walled valley to tell the Battles family of the beginning success of partnership with Jack Spratt. Arriving, she and Bowers cut out twenty head of her cattle to drive to the Spratt slaughterhouse that evening. They would be butchered the next day, but in daylight hours. Night slaughtering in the Yellowrock country was too dangerous.

VI

SHORTLY after Gail's arrival, a mounted messenger came to the walled valley seeking Kirby Grant. The messenger was a cowboy who handled cattle for Heyden and Gormack. The mesage was startling to Kirby, asking him to call on Heyden and Gormack to talk over a matter which would be to the mutual profit of Mr. Grant, and Heyden and Gormack.

Kirby's second call on Heyden and Gormack in their meat market office met with a far different reception from his first. The attitude of the two partners was cordiality itself. Hayden held out a box of cigars; Gormack produced whisky and glasses.

Kirby refused both and built himself a cigarette, waiting to hear what the

pair had to say.

"No good in our wasting time beating around the bush, Grant," said Heyden. "Gormack and me, we've decided to make you a proposition we know you'll like. What we need is a man to arrange to get us cattle. A lot of 'em."

"Need a cattle buyer, eh?" said Kirby who guessed that the two wanted nothing of the sort. "Yes, I think I could buy you fellows all the beef you could use. Lot of cattle over the West wanting a market. Trouble is, folks will be slow to send stuff here to sell. Too many reports of rustlers and trouble from brand inspectors. We'd have to pay for cattle on the ranches and drive them for ourselves."

Hayden and Gormack exchanged glances. "We don't mean quite that kind of buying," Heyden said suavely. "Going to ranches to buy cattle would take too long. There's already a lot of cattle somewhere in this country. We think a smart man could get those cattle for us quick and cheap. A smart man like you."

"Coming from a smart pair like you," said Kirby, "that's a real compliment. But I'm surprised you want to deal with me, after that fight last night at Spratt's slaughterhouse. People seem to believe you sent those men down there to hold up Spratt."

Heyden shook his head. "We had nothing to do with that. Some of our men quit us and figured to start in a meat business with stolen meat. We'd be crazy to back an open robbery. We don't hold anything against you for your part in that fight. Forget it. The cattle we'd like to have you get for us are bunches and herds that were driven to this country and disappeared here or on the way. Rustlers got 'em.

"We've been checking up and we believe there's over a thousand head, maybe more, somewhere around Yellowrock. They haven't been butchered or moved out of this country, and from what we can learn, one band of rustlers did most of the stealing and have those cattle hidden out somewhere. We figure you're the man who could get in touch with those rustlers."

"What makes you think that?" asked Kirby directly.

Heyden smiled. "Come, come. You travel here with a bunch of cattle wearing a dozen different brands and word came on ahead that they were run off by men from one neighborhood over in the Prieto Mountains. I saw one letter myself from a man named Shaw who is head of a cattlemen's organization over there. Named the brands of the cattle and gave a pretty good description of you. We figure it takes a rustler to deal with rustlers. And we'll pay you big money if the job appeals to you."

"It might," admitted Kirby. "But rustlers are going to be afraid to sell to you after you've had Scriven and his gang seize all the cattle here, claiming them stolen."

"Scriven's inspection game is played out," said Heyden. "Scriven is done."

KIRBY grinned. "And that's why you're talking to me? Scriven can't get you any more cheap cattle and you think you can, is that it? You'll have to jingle plenty money to get cattle from rustlers. You worked through Scriven to put the squeeze on too many fellows like me so you buzzards could get our herds for nothing. Naturally that rustler gang hates you same as a pair of rattlesnakes, which you are," he added impudently.

Gormack growled, but Heyden shook his head at his partner to keep still. "You're a mighty blunt talker, Grant," Heyden said sharply. "A damned blunt sort."

"Got good reason to be, haven't I?" retorted Kirby. "After you pointed out that gallows up on the hill and threatened me with it if I didn't give you my cattle for a thousand dollars. Those gallows don't look good to me. I've heard you got some cowboys strung up as decorations on that Judge Lynch Christmas tree—working through the Miners' Court, having men grabbed and given a phony trial. I got a notion you two could

sic those miners on about anyone you wanted out of your road. Including me."

"If you were in with us, there wouldn't be any danger of that," said Gormack.

"Let's put it different, Gormack," said Heyden. "We had nothing to do with hanging the few cattlemen that ended on that gallows. We've only showed that gallows to a few rustlers to put on the pressure so we could buy their cattle cheap. But our talk was only a bluff."

"How about Marshal Grudd?" asked Kirby. "Can you guarantee he'll keep hands off?"

"We can see that the marshal doesn't bother you," stated Heyden. "So you'll run no risk from the law if you can make a deal on those rustler cattle. And there's something else we want you to do—keep any more cattle from going to Spratt."

Kirby grinned. "So you'll have a lone hand in selling beef here? All right. I'll see what I can do. Give me a few days to investigate and I'll come back and tell you how many cattle I can get, if any, and what they'll cost or how many gunmen it will take to grab 'em."

Heyden nodded approvingly. "Do that. I think we understand each other," he continued with a sudden edge to his voice. "We'd better. We're all playing for high stakes here."

"And maybe taking high risks," Kirby said grimly. He nodded to the gallows on the hill. "There's one man I'd like to ask you about—Lon Teft. Know anything about him?"

"Just that he says he's a stock detective sent here by a bunch of cowmen to find their stolen cattle. He won't bother you. He's been yapping a lot at Scriven and Scriven hates him like poison. So I got a hunch Teft won't be around Yellowrock much longer—not alive, anyway."

When Kirby went out into the street again it was nearly dark. Since it was Saturday night, larger crowds of men than usual overflowed the sidewalks into the dusty streets. Kirby drifted idly with the ebb and flow of the crowd, turning over the offer of Heyden and Gormack. They wanted stolen cattle because stolen goods can always be bought more cheaply than honest goods.

Kirby went to the lobby of one of the small hotels and used a desk to write a long letter, mailing it in the post office where a queue of men waited patiently for their letters and home newspepers. Then he had supper and after that went in search of Lon Teft, asking a few bartenders if they had seen the tall cowboy. One reported Teft had been in earlier but had left likely for the Crescent Saloon where Teft hung out a lot.

THE CRESCENT was a long, narrow room with gambling tables in back. Lon Teft was there, talking at the far end of the bar to a bearded oldster in range garb, laughing a lot as he usually did when he talked. Kirby did not interrupt, but drank a glass of beer slowly at the street end of the bar, waiting until Teft was free. The old cowboy went out, leaving Teft alone, but Kirby held his place, waiting for Teft to see him, not wanting Teft to think Kirby had sought him out. But before Teft saw Kirby, a man pushed open the doors of the saloon and stood glaring hostilely at the room.

The newcomer was the brand inspector, Dike Scriven, plainly drunk and in a temper. Kirby put his back against a wall. Scriven had once tried to arrest Kirby in Yellowrock and might try it again. Scriven had eyes, however, only for Teft, looming above his neighbors in his gaudy garb topped by his enormous sombrero, with a chin strap and dangling silver concho. Undoubtedly Teft was armed; a bulge showed under his fancy vest.

"You, Teft!" shouted Scriven, and all the men in the saloon came to attention as if an order had been barked at them. A man didn't use that tone unless his intentions were strictly hostile. Scriven was well heeled for trouble with a .45 riding in a holster at his

waist, his deputy badge allowing him to wear weapons openly. Kirby noticed another man slipping in from the back, past the gambling tables. It was one of Scriven's inspectors. Men hastily got out of the line of possible fire. Kirby remained where he was, back against the wall.

"You," snarled Scriven. "You've spread a lot of dirty talk against me since you've been in Yellowrock. Claiming I was a plain cow thief, grabbing cattle under authority of my badge and selling 'em. Now I want you to say before witnesses that you lied."

Teft did the one thing that was sure to precipitate a battle with Scriven in the inspector's state of temper. He

laughed, sneeringly, insultingly. The laugh was enough to make Scriven lose his vast vestige of self-control. His right hand started down for his gun. Drunk, he was still very fast.

Teft turned sideways as he drew a gun from a shoulder holster under his vest. The maneuver probably saved his life, for when Scriven fired he missed Teft. Teft's shot came a split second later, and Scriven's lean length went limp at once.

Teft had been alert enough to note the second inspector who had entered through the gambling tables and was now drawing a gun. The man was slow and realized he had no chance. When Teft swung the gun barrel toward him, the man dropped his gun and raised his hands, shouting, "Don't shoot, Teft! You got Scriven. That's enough for me."

Teft had turned to face this second man, holding his fire, but a third individual was taking cards in the deal, one of the bartenders. Treacherously he was raising a sawed-off shotgun that would have splattered Teft over the saloon floor.

"Look out, Lon!" yelled Kirby. "Behind you."

Teft would be too late, Kirby realized, and as he yelled Kirby sent his right hand streaking under his vest to bring out the gun he had changed from a hip to a shoulder holster in accordance with Marshal Grudd's Yellowrock rule. He took a snap shot, but the distance was short enough to make such a shot accurate. The slug hit the bartender in the right shoulder and the man, stunned by the impact of the slug, went down.

There was silence for a moment. Then one man evidently in cahoots with Scriven's outfit let out a bellow, "Git that Lon Teft! String up that cowboy! He shot down Scriven and Dan Ward. Shot 'em both in the back."

The yells were taken up by the men outside. It seemed to Kirby that there was an organized group of men placed there ready to raise a summons for a hang mob if Teft got the better of Scriven. Men started to pour in through the front.

"Grab him and take him up to Gallows Hill," they were shouting. "Room up there for another cussed shoot-em-in-the back cowboy."

IT WAS a drunken, bloodthirsty mob that rushed into the saloon, yelling for immediate vengeance. The mob could mean as much danger for Kirby as for Teft if he didn't get out of the way.

Together he and Teft retreated

through the gambling tables in back to the rear door which opened on a cluttered alley. Facing the drawn guns of the two, no one tried to stop their retreat, but the leaders of the crowd were forced by the pressure behind them to press close on the fugitives.

"You shot that polecat just in time," said Lon Teft carelessly as they ran down the alley. "I'll do the same for you some day."

They ran out of the alley and across the street, boots clattering briefly on the sidewalks, and pounded down another alley. Men were running after them in the d a r k n e s s, and Kirby breathed a little easier as they came to his horse. Another saddled horse was tied near Kirby's. Teft whooped and ran toward this animal at once.

"Here's a horse I can borrow," he yelled. "Belongs to a friend of mine." He swung up, and Kirby ran on to throw himself into his saddle. Teft held back the lead pursuers by flourishing his six-shooter.

Then, with a defiant yell, Teft led the way along the street, the hoofs of the two horses thudding loudly down the hill toward the river. For the second time, Kirby found himself fleeing Yellowrock. Again there was no pursuit. The miners lacked horses.

"Looks as if you'd have to make yourself scarce in Yellowrock after this," observed Kirby as the two slowed their horses and jogged along together.

"No," said Lon carelessly. "Everybody in Yellowrock knows Scriven deserved killing, and anyway I doubt if I finished him. Those miners forget about these things next morning when the whisky is out of them. But I won't go back tonight. I'll ride out to your camp with you and b o r r o w a few blankets."

"Come ahead," said Kirby. "Glad to have you. Been wanting to talk to you, Lon."

"Been wanting to talk to you, too," chuckled Teft. "You, Kirby Grant, the honest feller who always preached it was wrong to steal even a neighbor's calf. Showing up here with a bunch of cattle wearing a dozen different brands and none of 'em changed. If you go about stealing, why don't you be smart and pick cattle that you can burn new brands on?"

"You going to arrest me for showing up here with a rustled herd, Mr. Stock Detective?" asked Kirby.

Teft laughed. "I'll let you off this time since you ain't got none of the rustled cattle of the men hiring me as stock detective. But you ought to know a few of the dodges. They've got you cold here, showing up with those cattle. Letters come in here weeks ago from Dan Shaw warning butchers not to buy your stuff, that it had been stole. And they give your name and a good description of you, too. Lord, but you're green."

"Yeah?" said Kirby, plainly nettled. "I can take care of myself. I may be a little green, but Heyden and Gormack think I'm smart. They offered to buy my bunch and they'll give me the job of buying cattle for them, at big pay. They want me to buy stolen cattle for 'em. They think a lot of rustlers' stock can be found near here. They'll deal with rustlers now, and pay reasonable prices."

"They've sure changed then," growled Teft. "They been sicking Scriven onto a n y b o d y that showed up here with cattle. You aiming to get in touch with them rustlers?"

"Yeah, I may," commented Kirby. "But I'm moving slow in this."

"Yeah, I'd go slow if I was you, too," laughed Teft. "You're too young and inexperienced. You'll get y o u r s e l f tangled in a rope with mebbe a hangnoose in one end of it. Ain't no rustled cattle in this country anyway, 'cepting yours. I been looking for 'em and I know. That big herd of rustled cattle supposed to be held near here is only a wild yarn."

After that they loped for a few miles. Then Teft spoke again. "I never figured, Kirby, you'd turn to cattle stealing. I hate to see it."

"Forty dollars a month wages is a slow way to get a start for the ranch I'd like to own," explained Kirby.

"I figure on settling down myself on a ranch," said Teft, "but not alone. This here Camlin girl that come in with a bunch of cattle would make a fine partner."

Kirby's voice, suddenly harsh, came instantly. "Too god a partner for you! Lon, we've known each other all our lives. You're no more fit husband for her than a half-breed horse thief would be. Stay away from her."

"And leave you a clear field?" returned Teft. "Amigo, I'm afraid you're just as green with women as you are with cattle rustling."

"You heard what I said about keeping away from Gail Camlin!" stated Grant, his voice hard.

"I'll think it over," laughed Teft good-humoredly.

When they reached the Grant camp in the walled valley, no one was awake but the two night guards still maintained by the crews. Before Teft turned in, Kirby, observing him from his own bedroll, saw Teft slip to the Dutch ovens to make a package of cold biscuits and meat and help himself to a canteen. Enough grub for a day's ride at least. And Kirby was not surprised when Teft got up before dawn, stealthily saddled his horse and slipped out of camp.

KIRBY knew better than to trail Lon Teft closely; Teft was too wary for that. He allowed Teft a full hour's start before he followed, riding through the narrow canyon that led from the walled valley.

It was light enough by then for Kirby to see that Teft had headed west, leaving a trail over frosty ground all the way to the river. Fording the stream had brought Teft to the freight road to Yellowrock. Teams had already moved along the road, stirring the dust. The trail of Teft's horse could be seen, however, heading in the direction of Yellowrock. But Kirby doubted that Lon had ridden to Yellowrock. If so, why had he taken a supply of food?

Kirby followed the road down the river a few hundred yards, then halted. He knew if Lon had any idea that he might be followed, he would trickily try to cover his trail.

Fording the stream again, after some search Kirby found the tracks of Teft's horse along the bank now headed north in the direction away from Yellowrock. When Teft recrossed his trail at the ford, he evidently had put his horse to wading in the shallow stream for some distance. A little above, Kirby saw the wet trail left by the horse emerging from the river. From there on the trail was easy to read.

For two hours Kirby followed it, through a chain of small dry mountains, to drop into a vast expanse of arid waste from which emerged isolated low hills.

Kirby carried a pair of powerful glasses and he used them now from a little elevation. They revealed no rider ahead although the tracks of Teft's horse lay easy to see. After traveling all morning, he halted, eased the saddle cinches, drank from the canteen he had hung on the saddle horn, and ate his cold biscuits and meat.

Again riding on, he noted that the plain was rising gradually toward some distant high hills that lay like a herd of huge fat dinosaurs. Steadily Teft's trail approached these hill-like dunes, crossing now a greasewood desert cut by gullies. In this, a well-beaten trail had been punched by shod hoofs. Apparently the trail had been used as a route by either cowboys or prospectors.

When the dune-like brown hills came close, Kirby grunted suddenly. Those hills were sand dunes, huge ones, piled up by winds over centuries in mounds that were nearly a thousand feet in height.

It was puzzling that Teft should have headed for the dunes. If Teft was hunting stolen cattle in his rôle as stock detective, this region certainly was the last place to look. There was no hint

that cattle had passed through here, but if any had passed, all trace would be erased a day or so later by wind-driven sands.

Kirby touched his horse with a spur and went on. He had gone only a few yards when, without warning, came a shot, the report sounding from one of the hills ahead. A warning shot, he guessed, for he and the horse made too big a target to be missed. If he went on, the next shot might be in earnest. Whether the man firing the rifle was Lon Teft or not, it was plain notice that Kirby had come far enough.

There was nothing to do but heed the warning and go back, at least until he was out of sight. Leisurely he turned his horse. Evidently whoever had fired must have disliked Kirby's calmness, for he fired again, sending a second bullet dangerously close to Kirby's head.

At that, Kirby spurred his horse into a run, zigzagging to make himself a poorer target. The rifle crashed again and again, and he could hear the whir of shots zinging past. It would be like Lon to see how close he could come to a man without hitting him. Teft was quite a practical joker, and proud of his skill with a rifle.

There was no hope of catching sight of the rifleman, but Kirby emptied his Winchester, slamming out shots at the dunes to satisfy his irritation at the unseen rifleman, and hoping vainly there would be a reply. Then, realizing he was only wasting cartridges, Kirby took the back trail. He was determined to investigate that dune area, but his horse needed rest, water and feed. Kirby guessed he had been getting close to something that Teft wanted to keep a secret.

VII

NOW IT was growing late. Planning to hit the stage and freight road to Yellowrock, he angled southwest, arriving there an hour after dark. To the south was a dim light, a stage station, he hoped. The moon had come up when he reached the place, a long building, half adobe, half logs, with a low dirt roof and a dirt stable and corrals nearby.

A stage was due before long, for in one room lighted by lanterns, an oilcloth-covered table was set with a dozen places. The half-breed wife of the station tender was cooking in the kitchen. The tender at first said he had no horse feed to spare, but after seeing the five-dollar gold piece in Kirby's fingers, he accepted it and motioned toward the stables. Kirby could have supper also but he would have to wait until the Yellowrock stage arrived and eat with the passengers.

The stagecoach came in with its six little mules on a lope and steaming with sweat. The tender unhitched while the driver and passengers trooped in to wash at the single granite basin. There were eight passengers, and as Kirby's eyes lighted on one, a gray-mustached, paunchy cattleman with a moon-shaped, florid face, he started. The cattleman, looking at Kirby without greeting, moved to the corrals. Kirby drifted away to meet the passenger back of a mud wall.

The passenger was Dan Shaw who ranched in the Prieto Mountains, Kirby's home. It was the same Dan Shaw who had written to the Yellowrock authorities giving Kirby Grant's description and reporting that Kirby was trailing toward Yellowrock with a bunch of stolen cattle, and listing all the brands. But the two, strangely enough, now met as friends.

"This is sure a lucky meeting, Kirby," said the older man, shaking hands. "No time now to explain why I decided to come to Yellowrock to look over things for myself. We've got to make this talk short, and we can't aford to be seen together here or in Yellowrock. Coach is late and I got to grab a bit of grub."

"I wrote you a letter a couple of days ago," said Kirby. "There's a big fight due here. Two men, Heyden and Gormack, control the buying of all cattle here—set their own price with the help

of three fake brand inspectors. A girl brought in a herd of cattle and went into partnership with a busted butcher, Jack Spratt. They're giving those Heyden-Gormack crooks a lot of competition, and if they can keep their business going it means a good market for cattle.

"There seems little doubt but that there's a herd of rustled cattle hidden somewhere in this country. Heyden and Gormack have kept the rustlers from selling them in Yellowrock. Now the two want me to find those cattle and arrange to buy them cheap or just grab them by force."

"They asked you to do that?" questioned Shaw, laughing so that his paunchy front shook. "Let's hope those cattle are the ones stolen from the Prietos."

"I got some other news. Lon Teft is in here—as a stock detective."

"As a stock detective!" Shaw exclaimed. "That son-of-a-gun. Looks like I came just in time to get in on a lot of excitement. I'll look over the situation and see what I can learn. Meanwhile, we won't know each other in Yellowrock. I'll register at the hotel as Dan Shane. You still have that bunch of cattle you brought over?"

"Yes. Holding them not far from Yellowrock. They fooled Heyden and Gormack into figuring I'm a rustler, but I don't think Lon Teft is entirely convinced."

"Lon might be hard to convince you've turned rustler," agreed Shaw. "But I've got to go into supper. We'll get together for a long talk in Yellowrock. You'll follow us, of course? Peggy and I will be at the Bonanza Place."

"You brought Peggy along?" asked Kirby, surprised. "That town's hardly the place for an eighteen-year-old girl. It's a wild place."

"Peggy can look after herself," said Shaw carelessly. "I couldn't keep her home. She's crazy to see a little life. I'll send her out for a minute. She'll want to see you."

The girl came out a little later. Seen in the moonlight, she was pretty, built a little on the buxom side, a brunette with a full, red-lipped mouth.

"Fancy meeting you here, Kirby," she addressed him in an affected babyish voice. "I just can't wait until I get to Yellowrock. It must be a wonderful place with a lot of stores filled with fine dresses and diamond rings and brooches and tiaras."

"Some nice stores there," he admitted. "But those diamonds and duds are for a few millionaire miners that struck it rich."

"I don't see why we can't become millionaires, too," Peggy pouted. "I thought by this time, Kirby, you'd have you a gold mine."

"Me dig in the ground?" laughed Kirby. "I wouldn't know anything about that, Peggy. I'll have to stick to cattle. Plenty of money to be made if we can get this Yellowrock to buy our cattle. Meat, they say, will sell for a dollar a pound this winter."

"Oh, cattle and meat," the girl said contemptuously. "Who wants to worry about cattle when you can dig gold right out of the ground? Don't tell Dad, but I had a letter from Lon Teft. He's a smart fellow. He says he's getting very rich over here."

"Maybe he is," said Kirby, "but I doubt it. Yellowrock's a tough town, Peggy," he went on in a fatherly tone. "You stay close to your father. It's a dangerous town, and don't you listen to Lon Teft. He's got a smooth tongue and a slick brain."

The girl only laughed. "Everyone runs down Lon Teft. But I've always liked him. He's handsome and smart, Lon is. He'll be a rich man some day."

Kirby went in to supper, eating more leisurely than the passengers who were anxious to get to Yellowrock and the pots of gold they thought awaited them there. Six fresh mules had been hitched to the coach and the vehicle rumbled off into the night.

The meeting with Shaw had changed Kirby's plans. He had intended to get some supplies at the stage station and ride back to the dunes, coming in from

the north side to investigate thoroughly the far-fetched possibility that a herd of stolen cattle were concealed somewhere in or about them.

After his horse had a few hours' rest, Kirby saddled and headed back toward Yellowrock.

FROM THE first day of the reopening of the market, the partnership meat business between Gail Camlin and Jack Spratt boomed. For it was good beef that Jack Spratt and Gail were selling, from fat animals, and his market was spotless. All day long miners and town people crowded the "Jack Spratt—Fat Meats" market to buy good meat at lower prices than Heyden and Gormack charged for poor beef. The market did a big wholesale business also. Storekeepers in outlying mining camps came in to buy beef to retail, and many miners purchased one or more quarters.

Spratt had hired more butchers, and Gail drove bunches of cattle to the white slaughterhouse on the river. The girl's share in three days was enough to repay the debts owed by her father. She bought drafts at the express company office for the amounts he had owed, while Jack Spratt paid all his back rent, his help, and still had a lot of money left.

Spratt, however, shook his head dolefully. "It won't last," he predicted. "We can't fight Heyden and Gormack. They won't let us bust the meat monopoly they've held in Yellowrock."

"They've let us do it so far," Gail pointed out.

"When those snakes don't do anything," said Spratt, "then is the time for us to worry most. Now we know that they're cooking up trouble."

But Gail was too busy to worry much. Keeping books at the market, acting as cashier, riding between Yellowrock and the walled valley to bring in more cattle for slaughter took part of the nights beside all of the days.

Poke and Ma Battles and their boys were watching the dwindling herd of cattle with Kirby Grant's crew ready to help in case of necessity. There had been no trouble in the valley, however, since the night of the stampede. Gail's cattle and her Uncle Starr's grazed peacefully alongside the Grant herd and put on a few more pounds of fat.

There still was no word from Starr Camlin. Poke Battles had ridden to Jack's Creek where Marshal Grudd had heard the rancher had been mining, only to find that Camlin had left with a party of prospectors bound for Squaw Peak, to prospect in some of its hundred canyons and gulches. It was plain that Starr Camlin had completely yielded to the gold craze.

Gail's cattle would not last long at the rate they were being slaughtered, and they could have used her uncle's cattle if they could have found the owner to get his permission. Gail hesitated to drive any of Starr's cattle to the slaughterhouse. Not only had she no authority from her uncle to sell, but she was also a little doubtful about the title to the B-in-a-Box cattle her uncle had bought.

KIRBY was in Yellowrock, lounging about doing nothing apparently, occasionally dropping into the Spratt meat market to talk to Gail. She didn't approve of Kirby's idleness, or anybody's idleness for that matter. Another thing she didn't approve of—Kirby was spending a lot of time at Heyden and Gormack's place.

Lon Teft was also idling about Yellowrock, gambling, patronizing the saloons, taking as a huge joke the narrow escape he had had from being lynched for shooting Dike Scriven in the Crescent Saloon. The miners had gotten over their drunken rage, and it was agreed that Heyden and Gormack had had men ready to whip up a mob into a lynching rage against Teft, maybe because as a stock detective he might learn too much about the connection between the brand inspectors and Heyden and Gormack. Dike had been taken to a hospital on the coast. He might recover or he might

not. Which apparently made no difference to anyone except Dike Scriven.

Lon talked to Gail whenever the chance offered, and when chances didn't offer, he came into the market to visit. You couldn't dislike Lon. Outside of Heyden and Gormack, it was agreed that he hadn't an enemy in Yellowrock. Personally Gail had little use for him, but she tried to be charitable.

Lon brought into the store one afternoon two people who were recent arrivals on the stage, a cattleman and his daughter.

"These are some friends of mine," said Lon. "Dan Shaw—Shane I mean, and his daughter, Peggy. Shane owns a ranch back in the Prietos."

Gail shook hands with the cowman, but Peggy looked at Gail's divided skirt

and turned up her short nose. Peggy was dressed in new garb, the kind that dancehall girls wore when they wished to appear elegant.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," said Dan Shane. "I understand you and Mr. Spratt are building up a good market for butchered stock here. There are a lot of cattle we Prieto cattlemen could drive to Yellowrock if we were sure of good prices. I've heard that you have a fight on your hands with the Heyden-Gormack bunch."

"Fight is a mild word for it. We don't even know how long we'll be allowed to be in business here," the girl said bitterly. "Yellowrock will never be a safe market until it has real law—with those gallows on the hill torn down."

"I agree with you about Yellowrock," said Shane. "It's not safe to bring cattle here now. Us cattlemen got to work together. I've talked to Sheriff Dawes and I think he'd help us. But Marshal Grudd says he's got nothing to do with cattle. He's just city marshal."

The Shanes went out, but Lon Teft remained. He annoyed Gail with his plain belief that he was a fatal lady killer and that one smile should make a female swoon with delight.

"I don't get anywhere with you," he complained, sensing her irritation with him. "Been plenty of girls that didn't think I was exactly poison. Trouble is, you're stuck on Kirby Grant. I can see that."

"You can't see anything of the kind," Gail declared indignantly. "I hardly know him."

"I do," said Teft, "and from what I know about him, I'd hate to see any girl put any trust in him. Why, those cattle he's got over in that valley, he no more owns 'em than I do. But I wouldn't care so much about that, even if I'm a stock detective. It's his going in cahoots with those crook killers Heyden and Gormack, that gripes me."

"He's not in cahoots with them," said Gail. "He wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't he?" sneered Lon. "He's working for 'em. Ask him if you don't believe it."

"I certainly don't believe it," said Gail. "And I happen to be very busy just now, Mr. Teft," she added pointedly, making her annoyance plain.

YET WHEN she met Kirby in the street after the talk with Lon, enough of Teft's words remained with her to cause her to start sailing past with only a nod. Kirby grinned and she stopped.

"Seems you don't know me any more," he complained. "I'm Kirby Grant. You remember me."

"I remember a few days ago," she said coldly, "you were calling Heyden and Gormack thieves. And now you're thick as thieves with them. But of

course that's none of my business.

"Any business of mine," he told her, "you can make your business too. I like to have you worrying about me."

Gail flushed, exasperated. "I don't worry about you. I wish Jack Spratt and I could pay you in cash for what you did in stopping that holdup in the slaughterhouse. So we wouldn't feel in your debt."

"You don't owe me a thing for that," he assured her genially. "It was a plumb pleasure. But I've been wanting to warn you about something. If you can give me time for a word."

"All right," she said curtly. "If it's only a word."

"It'll have to be two words. They're 'Go Slow.' Those B-in-a-Box cattle you brought in here for your uncle were stolen."

"You might be an expert on stolen cattle, but I happened to be there when Uncle Starr bought and paid for those cattle."

"I don't say your uncle's a thief," returned Kirby, "or that he knew he was buying stolen cattle. I only say those cattle were rustled months ago from the ranch of John Beard, the owner. He's been in town a few days and he's on the warpath. He's been told where he can find his cattle. If I were you I'd turn lose of those cattle and get 'em out of the valley in a hurry. There's no doubt they were stolen off Beard's ranch by some hombre that must of sold 'em to your uncle."

"No," she said stubbornly, "I'm going to hold them. It's only fair to my uncle. Let this man Beard prove they're his and he can have them. But not before."

Kirby's face turned stern. "You're being a fool!" he burst out. "Don't you know you're playing with fire? Heyden and Gormack have got hold of Beard. They've sent for Sheriff Dawes, and as soon as he arrives Beard will have him ride out and find you in possession of stolen cattle. And all you can say in defense is that they're owned by an uncle that isn't even here."

"It's the truth."

"Expect the sheriff and Beard to believe a yarn like that, even if it is the truth? Possession of stolen cattle is mighty serious. Heyden and Gormack want to get rid of you and Spratt. I'm advising you straight on this. Have those blasted B-in-a-Box cattle thrown out of the valley now—tonight."

Gail shrugged her shoulders and went back to the market to work until late at night checking acounts with Spratt. It was simply dazzling the way that money could be made in the meat business. Already she had a sizable account at the Yellowrock bank. Old Man Bowers had brought in another bunch of her cattle for slaughter that afternoon and the next morning she rode out to the valley to cut out still another.

There Poke and Ma Battles met her with long faces. "Some men jumped us last night," said Poke, "and took your uncle's cattle down through the canyon. Every last head of 'em."

"But that's not possible!" Gail cried. "Not with the fence and some of you always riding guard."

"We weren't on guard," explained Poke. "Kirby Grant came out in the evening and said him and his men would take over night guard so we could get a good sleep. It wasn't till an hour ago I noticed all them B-in-a-Box cattle were gone from out here, every last one of 'em. Somebody had made a hole in the fence and cut 'em out in the moonlight and drove 'em out. Didn't take ary head of your herd or Kirby's."

"And I suppose I am to believe that was done by rustlers? That rustlers picked out B-in-a-Box cattle in the moonlight and sneaked 'em out of here so quietly that Kirby's crew never heard 'em go? I'm swearing out a warrant against Kirby for stealing my uncle's cattle."

FURIOUS with rage, she rode over to the Grant camp in the pines. Kirby was seated on a bedroll in front of the fire, drinking coffee.

"You took those cattle out last night!" she accused him. "If you don't bring

them back right away, I'll notify the sheriff. Those cattle were left in my care, and I'm responsible for them."

"That's the way you feel about it, is it?" he returned lazily and glanced down the valley. "But if you really want to see the sheriff, you won't have to ride far to do it."

He waved his hand and Gail turned her head. Half a dozen men were riding up the valley, with blocky Sheriff Dawes, whom she had seen during one of his visits to Yellowrock, in the lead. A lanky cattleman was alongside him and four men followed. They rode through the valley looking at the grazing cattle, before angling over to meet Gail and Kirby who rode out toward them.

"My name's Beard and I've come to get my B-in-a-Box cattle," said the lanky man riding with the sheriff. "And I'll see that the rustler that drove them here pays for it, girl or no girl."

"Look around for your cattle," put in Kirby before Gail could say anything. "Help yourself and have a good look for your B-in-a-Box cattle. I don't like your language, Mr. Beard, if you're hinting that this girl is a rustler. But I might be wrong about that—if you can find your cattle here."

"I was told they were here," blustered Beard. "And they were here, unless you shoved 'em out before we come."

"There were some strays in here," admitted Kirby. "Lemme se, they did have B-in-a-Box brands on 'em. They stuck around here and we didn't have enough pasture for 'em and our cattle too, so we shoved 'em out. You can't expect us to look after your stock, Mr. Beard," he went on severely. "Why don't you take care of your stuff instead of coming around here accusing us of being rustlers?"

"If you'll let me explain," began Gail, but Kirby suddenly laughed so loud that the girl was shocked into startled silence.

"I remember now about those B-in-a-Box cattle," said Kirby. "They came in one dark night. Maybe they came with Miss Camlin's cattle, but she never claimed them as hers. I'll be witness to that. And if you don't want to take my word, just call me a liar, Mr. Beard, and we'll go on from there. If you do a little riding, you'll likely find your cows."

Sheriff Dawes, who was no cowman, was confused by all this. Mr. Beard was grumbling, but not too loud or profanely. It ended in the group riding out after making a thorough search of the valley.

Gail turned to Kirby Grant after they were gone. "I was a fool," she said frankly. "I've had doubts about the title to those cattle myself, but I was too stubborn to admit it."

"Everyone makes mistakes," said Kirby. "Your uncle made a big one in buying those cattle. He's lost whatever money he paid for them."

"He deserved to lose it, though it wasn't much. And I deserve to have been arrested for being a fool. The way I talked to you just now—threatening you with arrest. I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself."

He laughed. "What you said when you were mad was only natural. I only wish you'd stick up for me that way some time."

"All right," she said, her blue eyes glowing. "I think I'll stick up for you right now, Kirby Grant. I don't believe you're really a rustler."

"You mean that?" he asked, flabbergasted. "But all the evidence is against me. A letter came to Yellowrock giving my description and saying I'd stolen cattle from the Prietos. You simply have to believe I'm a rustler with that evidence."

"But I don't," she stated. "And I can't believe you're really joining up with those crooks, Heyden and Gormack. You can't do that, after fighting off the bunch they sent to steal our beeves at the slaughterhouse. You know there's going to be a showdown fight with Heyden and Gormack, a fight between thieves and honest men. Surely you won't be on their side, against us?"

He looked at her queerly. "You say

that as if you care which side I take. On sort of personal grounds, I mean."

"I do," she said frankly. "You seem to be a decent sort, Kirby Grant. Sometimes to me you seem more like a kid who's held horses for a bunch of train robbers and figured he's got to act like a bad, bad hombre. But I think you only act that way."

He laughed. "So that's how you size me up? But you're right about a big showdown scrap coming on. It's going to be too dirty for a girl to be in. And you and Jack Spratt are liable to be in the middle of it. I'd tell you to pull out but I know from watching you you're not the quitting kind."

"You won't be fighting alongside us?" she said, disappointed. "You'll be fighting for them?"

"All I'm asking is that you withhold judgment on that. I'd rather lose every dollar I've got or ever will get to keep your good opinion, Gail, I want you to believe that."

"But if you're working with those crooks, how can I keep from thinking you are as bad as they are?" she demanded.

"All I'm asking you is to wait," he returned stubbornly. "To take me on trust. That's not asking too much of you, is it Gail?"

She looked at him gravely. "All right," she said, "I'll wait to decide about you. Maybe you are a cattle rustler, but sometimes I think even that might not make so much difference if you thought enough of a man. But the man I'd think a lot of wouldn't be a thief."

Kirby smiled. "If I should turn out to be that right man, at least I wouldn't be a thief, I can promise that. The only thing I've ever been tempted to steal was you. When all this is cleared up, I'll really tell you what I think about you. Heyden and Gormack were behind the sheriff's bunch that came out to arrest you, putting Beard up to trying to cinch you for a rustler. They'll hit at you again, and when they hit next it's going to be hard. And those two know how to do it!"

VIII

A COLD hard rain came to Yellowrock one afternoon, pouring down for two hours, sluicing along the streets, washing deep gullies. Then the rain stopped, but smoke from smelter and mill stacks hung low in the thick, clouded air.

Kirby Grant hesitated under a wooden awning, building a cigarette. For several days he had been trying to get a talk with Dan Shaw who went by the name of Shane in Yellowrock. Shaw had used another name so people wouldn't wonder why, having written to Yellowrock about a rustler named Kirby Grant, he didn't have Kirby arrested. Kirby wanted to ride to the dune country to hunt for the rustled cattle he believed held there, but Shaw had a ridiculous fear that their talk might be overheard and had dodged Kirby. Anyway, Shaw seemed too busy for talking. Poker and roulette had the same attraction for him that the dress shops and jewelry stores had for his daughter Peggy.

Kirby had noted that Lon Teft was often in Shaw's company. He suspected that Lon and some gambler friends were fleecing the Prieto rancher. Shaw, Kirby decided, wasn't going to be much help. He had known Dan Shaw intimately in the Prietos where he was a rancher neighbor of the Grant family. Shaw was no great shakes as a rancher, preferring to dabble in politics, which was one reason he had been able to have himself elected president of the organization of Prieto ranchers who had suffered heavy losses in stolen cattle.

Word had come that these cattle had been headed for Yellowrock. Two ranchers had ridden over to the mining town to investigate, but had come back to report only that apparently none of the Prieto cattle had been sold in Yellowrock. Which meant little, for if butchers had purchased them from rustlers, they would be keeping it a dark secret. There was a faint hope at least that the cattle were still alive and might be recovered.

Kirby had suggested that he drive a

small bunch of cattle to Yellowrock, cattle provided by his father and other Prieto ranchers. Word was to be sent ahead of him that the cattle had been stolen, automatically classing Kirby as a rustler. Through the stolen herd Kirby hoped to get in touch with the rustler gangs about Yellowrock and through them discover if the Prieto cattle were held in the country.

There were a dozen matters Kirby wanted to discuss now with Shaw, and it angered him that the rancher found no time for a palaver. Shaw, as president of the Prieto cattlemen's organization, was Kirby's boss, but Kirby hadn't come here to wait on his convenience. Shaw wasn't doing any personal investigation of the situation as he had promised, unless being a lot in Lon Teft's company could be considered that.

Determined now to see Shaw without further delay, Kirby went up a staircase to the rooms occupied by the father and daughter in the Bonanza Palace. When he knocked on the door, Peggy, clad in a fancy negligee bought in a Yellowrock shop, opened it. Her father was sitting trimming his mustache before the dresser mirror. Since coming to Yellowrock Shaw had bought himself one of the expensive black broadcloth suits worn by the more prosperous mining men. The Shaws had nice rooms here, and Bonanza Palace accommodations were expensive. Too expensive for a small rancher, although Shaw's expenses of course would be paid by the Prieto cattlemen's organization. "This isn't smart, Kirby," said Shaw reprovingly as Kirby entered. "It's downright dangerous if anyone should be watching me."

"What if someone is watching you?" Kirby returned. "We haven't got much time. What we got to do is locate that herd of stolen cattle, if there is one, and if we find Prieto cattle among them, take steps to get them back. I'd hoped I might get in touch with some of those rustlers who'd be willing to deal through me to sell to Heyden and Gormack. That hasn't worked out. I don't doubt but that some of those rustlers are here in town, but they haven't tried to deal with me.

"My opinion is," he went on, "that with a meat shortage shaping up for Yellowrock this winter, these rustlers just about figure they're holding gold on the hoof. When those miners get hungry enough, the rustlers reckon they can slaughter their cattle and sell them for big money, without splitting with Heyden and Gormack."

"What do you think we ought to do?" asked Shaw, resuming the trimming of his mustache.

"I have a good idea where those cattle might be found, and the first thing I'd like to do is find 'em. After that we've got to get hold of those cattle and move against the men who've been wrecking the cattle market here—Heyden and Gormack."

OVER HER father's shoulder, Peggy was primping before the dresser mirror, putting up her hair this way and that. Kirby thought that father and daughter were much alike, both vain, both attracted by fancy clothes and such luxuries as living in the Bonanza Palace.

"How do you like Yellowrock by this time?" he asked Peggy.

"For the first time in my life," Peggy declared ecstatically, in her babyish voice, "I'm living. Really living. I never want to go back to that old ranch. And Dad says we may not have to."

"How's that?" inquired Kirby, surprised.

"Why," said Shaw a little flustered, "a man with brains can make big money here. Some mining men Lon Teft introduced me to have promised to let me in on a rich claim they're developing on Jack's Creek. Got showings of millions of dollars in ore."

"Maybe," said Kirby dryly. "But there's a lot of crooks here that make money catching suckers. And aren't you forgetting what you came here for, Dan? We've got to work fast trying to get back those stolen Prieto cattle and then lick Heyden and Gormack so we can develop a market for cattle here."

"We'll have to move cautiously," said Shaw, busy with his scissors. "We've no evidence that any number of stolen cattle are in this country at all. Lon Teft tells me he's searched for a hundred miles in every direction and hasn't found a single head of stock. And Lon is smart."

"Lon is smart," agreed Kirby. "Too smart."

"I know," said Shaw, "that back in the Prietos people said a lot of bad things against Lon. Some say he had to leave after stealing cattle from your father and others. I've heard that your dad saved him from going to the pen."

"We liked Lon," said Kirby evasively. "Dad never did tell us about the deal, but I wouldn't trust what Lon told me. Not too much."

"Lon says he's reformed. And it looks like it for he's here as a stock detective, trying to find cattle for a bunch of men like us Prieto ranchers."

"So he says," said Kirby. "Lon's a good liar."

"I think Lon Teft is a real gentleman," declared Peggy warmly. "He makes me laugh. You wouldn't even think he was a cowboy. He's got such good manners and he's introduced me to some very high-class friends of his."

"I can imagine," returned Kirby sarcastically. "You keep away from those high-class friends of Lon's. Tinhorn gamblers, most of them. You've been raised in ranch country, Peggy, where most men are decent. In Yellowrock, men are different."

"You just don't like him, Kirby. Lon is the kind that I think of when I listen to the song about the cowboy: 'It was once in the saddle I used to go dashin', it was once in the saddle I used to go gay.' "

"Don't forget the rest of that verse," said Kirby. " 'First took to drinkin' and then to card playin', got a shot in the side and I'm dyin' today.' That may be the end of Lon. I hope not. Lon has his good points—I'm just letting you know, Dan, I intend to ride up and hunt those cattle. If I find 'em, we want the backing of the law to get them back. That means Sheriff Dawes. I'll be depending on you to handle Dawes."

"I've met Dawes and I don't think there'll be any trouble with him. He seems a nice fellow."

"Except he hasn't interfered much with Heyden and Gormack."

"I can get along with Dawes. Marshal Grudd I can't say I trust. I think Heyden and Gormack have him bought off."

"I don't agree," said Kirby. "He's protected Gail Camlin from Heyden and Gormack."

Peggy laughed suddenly. "Isn't that Gail Camlin funny?" she asked. "Wearing those terrible clothes, riding straddle like a man—I'd think she'd be ashamed."

"Look here," said Kirby sternly, "Gail was high class enough to drive her cattle over here and get a market for them. As for her riding straddle, it was the only way she could handle cattle."

"Why, listen to you!" exclaimed Peggy. "Lon said you'd fallen in love with that girl, and I believe it now."

Kirby flushed. "Don't talk nonsense," he ordered. "But I think she's a fine girl and I just don't like to hear you talk about her."

"There's no accounting for people's tastes," said Peggy. "She's pretty, I suppose, in a way," she added maliciously. "And I've heard that Marshal Grudd, who's old enough to be her father, is simply crazy over her. He fights her battles for her and they do say you can't blame him, the way she flirts with him."

Kirby's face darkened and his fists clenched. "You're getting to be a nasty little gossip, Peggy. Watch that tongue of yours or it might get you into a lot of trouble."

This made Peggy so mad that she went into her room and slammed the door.

"You know if we did find this herd of cattle," said Shaw thoughtfully, "we might consider selling them to Heyden and Gormack. I've met Liam Heyden and he seems to be a very fair sort of man."

"Fair!" burst out Kirby. "Good Lord, Dan, don't you realize they're crooks of

the first water? They've had cattlemen lynched in here just to get their herds. What's got into you, Dan? Those two have worked hand in hand with the fake brand inspectors to steal cattle right and left."

"I didn't get it that way from Mr. Heyden. He said those inspections cost them a lot of money. They paid big for the cattle and Scriven charged them a lot on top for inspection fees. But you go up to these dunes and see if you can find those cattle. Yes, I think that would be smart."

"Gracias," said Kirby ironically. "And do me a favor, will you? Don't mention where I'm going to Lon Teft or anyone else."

"If you say so, of course I won't," said Shaw. "But Lon, he's a stock detective—"

Kirby got up. "Don't say anything to him is all I ask," he said shortly.

HE WENT down the stairs and outdoors, where the rain was still falling and the lighted saloon fronts illuminated the wet street. The jangle of pianos and fiddles came faintly from behind closed doors.

He planned to ride out to the walled valley, load up a pack horse, and be prepared to stay out for a week if necessary —or until he definitely knew whether there was a big herd of cattle in the vicinity of the dune country or not.

Striding along the brick sidewalk toward the stable where he kept his horse, he stopped. A light still burned in the Spratt meat market, and through the windows he saw Jack Spratt and Gail Camlin at a desk working on some big ledgers. The girl's silver-gold hair looked like finely spun metal in the lamplight. Kirby started to go in to say good-by and found himself hesitating. Suddenly he felt like a bashful schoolboy looking at a pretty teacher.

Then, hearing a horse clop through the rain at a lope, he turned back to the street again. The rider called out hoarsely, "Hey Kirby!" It was the older Battles Boy, Pete, riding bareback on one of the Camlin horses.

Pete and the horse were mud-streaked as if from a fall and the boy was weaving, holding hard to the horse's mane. Kirby jumped to take the lad from the horse.

"What happened, Pete?" he demanded.

"The cattle—" gasped Pete. "All gone. Some buzzards come in and emptied the valley. Took every head last night. Shot Dad in the leg. Ran off the mule team and all the horses along with the cattle. 'Cepting they left this old plug down canyon. I found him and finally caught him when Ma sent me out afoot."

Carrying Pete in his arms, Kirby went to the door of the market and kicked on it. Spratt came up, peered out and then hastily unbarred the door.

"Where were Blue and the rest of my bunch?" Kirby asked.

"Why, you sent for 'em yesterday evening," said the boy. "You sent up a messenger that you was in a big fight with rustlers thirty miles south near Jack's Creek camp and wanted their help. They all hightailed it down there."

The boy began crying suddenly. "The buzzards come in and just cleaned out the valley. Poke and me and Ma and Joe give 'em a fight but it wasn't good enough. Drove us back into the brush."

The girl looked at Kirby inquiringly.

"I never sent for the boys," he said. "That was a trick to get Blue and Jim and the Wilsons out of the valley so it could be jumped. If the cattle were taken out last night, that gives those rustlers a big start. How many men were in the raid, Pete?"

"We counted eight. Might of been more."

Pete admitted he was hungry and Spratt took him into a restaurant next door to get him a hot meal.

Kirby and Gail stood in the doorway looking gloomily at the rain splashing in the street.

"Well," she said sharply, "did your bosses, Liam and Bill, tell you anything about this job? No, I didn't mean that, Kirby," she added contritely.

"Heyden and Gormack didn't do this

anyway. It was that bunch of rustlers that jumped us before. I've got an idea where they headed. I'm riding after 'em."

"But what can you do alone when they have eight men? I'll go and I know Bowers will go with us. We can pick him up at the slaughterhouse. That will make three."

"Not enough," said Kirby. "I'll go alone, trail them. When Blue and the others get back, send them on my trail. No, whoa up—luck is with us, a little anyway."

He pointed at the street along which four riders were coming at a lope, his missing crew—the two old-timers, Blue Lake and Jim Peebles, and the middle-aged cowhands, the Wilson brothers.

THE FOUR riders, wet slickers glistening as they passed lighted windows, had seen Kirby and Gail and pulled up close by.

"We was sent off," said Blue Lake, "by a feller said he come from you and you was in trouble on Jack's Creek. We didn't find you down there. I guess we made a little mistake."

"We all made a little mistake," said Kirby. "I should have arranged some password to send along when I had a message for you. They raided the valley last night, took off all the cattle and horses."

"Cattle," said Blue Lake, "can be got back or more raised in their places. Ma and Poke and the boys is diff'rent. I'd hate to have anything happen to any of 'em."

"They're all right. Poke got a shot through the leg but it's not serious. You boys need fresh horses. Dobbs Livery Stable has a few good ones and you can leave yours for security. Better fill up on a big supper, too. We're due for a long ride."

"I'll go get my horse," said Gail.

"I don't suppose," said Kirby, "you could be persuaded to let us go by ourselves? It won't be pretty if we catch up with those fellows. They'll be playing for keeps and the same goes for us."

"I'll only watch you play," Gail said.

The riders went on down the street while Kirby went into the restaurant where Spratt had taken Pete Battles. Lon Teft was sitting at a counter having a steak and cup of coffee, and to Kirby's annoyance, Spratt was telling Lon what had happened.

"That's a dirty bunch—Heyden and Gormack," Kirby heard Lon remark. "Jumping a woman and a couple young boys."

"We thought it was the rustlers that raided the valley the other night," said Jack Spratt.

"Rustlers!" scoffed Lon. "Hogwash! Ain't no rustlers in this country. Them raiders was men hired by Heyden and Gormack, same as they hired men to hold up your slaughterhouse to steal beeves that night." He turned and saw Kirby.

"Tough luck," he called.

Old Man Bowers had met Blue Lake's party and he now came hurrying in.

"We'll get those cattle back," declared Lon Teft as he chewed a steak. "They can't take a whole bunch of cattle and disappear with 'em. Me, I can track a butterfly through the air on a cloudy day."

"So far you ain't tracked up to no rustled cattle," returned Bowers.

Kirby was ordering a lot of sliced meat and loaves of bread to take on the trip. Lon Teft finished his steak and moved over.

"If you say the word, Kirby," he said, "you and me will go in to see Heyden and Gormack and tell the polecats just what we think of 'em."

"What good would that do?"

"Why, they'd go for their guns and we'd be rid of the buzzards," said Lon.

"How you figure that?" inquired Kirby.

"Why, the men that raided the valley was hired by Heyden and Gormack. Get rid of the bosses and their men will scatter."

Kirby shook his head. "Shooting Heyden and Gormack sounds a little cold and brutal."

"I always thought," said Lon, "you

was the reckless kind. But, of course, they say Heyden and Gormack hired you," he added tauntingly.

"I told 'em I'd see what I could do about getting slaughter cattle for them," said Kirby. "Right now I got my bunch of stolen cattle to look for. It's kind of you, Lon, to offer to side me in a gun-fight against those two. When I come back I'll hunt you up and talk it over."

"You won't have to hunt me up," said Lon. "I'm going with you."

"Yeah?" said Kirby. "I didn't hear you being asked, Lon."

"What's the matter?" sneered Teft. "Afraid I'll take some of the glory away from you? Me, I'm going along."

IX

PETE BATTLES was put to bed in a hotel room after a doctor had looked him over, and then the pursuit party—Gail, Kirby, Old Man Bowers, Blue Lake, and the other three members of the Grant crew—gathered in front of Spratt's market. Lon Teft, bringing up his horse, promptly tried to take charge.

"We'll go out to the valley and take up the trail where they started driving the cattle off," he declared. "Leave it to me. I'll foller 'em no matter how much they try to cover their trail."

Kirby muttered a few words to Blue Lake and then took Teft into a saloon to buy him a drink.

They were two miles from town when Lon's horse began to go lame, and almost immediately began hobbling on three legs. Lon swore and stopped for an examination, thinking it was a stone in a hoof. Blue Lake and Kirby were quick to offer help. There was no stone, but the horse was limping too badly to be ridden any further.

"Lemme trade horses with one of you," Lon offered eagerly. "I want to throw lead at them rustlers and I know I can trail 'em."

None of the men offered to trade mounts and Lon failed also to make a deal with Gail.

"I'll go back and git another horse," said Teft, "and catch up with you at the valley to help you take their trail come daylight."

Cursing his lame horse, Teft took the back trail. The party rode on, but at the place where the trail forked one branch crossing the little river to the head for the walled valley, Kirby halted.

"Gail, I think you and Mr. Bowers should go on to the valley to stay with the Battles family. I have an idea where those cattle went. No use trying to follow their trail. We men will ride to cut them off, and it's going to be a tough ride."

"All the more reason then for Mr. Bowers and me to go along," Gail stated. "We'll be in our saddles when you and your cowboys play out. Jack Spratt is going to the valley to help the Battles."

Kirby gave up and they rode through the rain which was slackening a little. Kirby led the way, retracing the route he had followed in trailing Lon a few days before.

Blue Lake moved alongside. "Well, we got rid of Teft. It was a dirty trick on his horse to lame the critter with that rawhide we tied to his foot, but he'll get over it. Lucky I could git it off 'fore he started to look at his horse."

"Yeah," said Kirby. "Good work, Blue. We don't know where Lon stands, but it's my guess it's on slippery ground. Lon was too anxious for us to take the trail from the valley."

"A queer bird, Lon Teft," remarked Blue Lake.

"That about sizes up Lon. Dad took him as a homeless kid, and as soon as he got old enough Lon threw in with a gang of rustlers to steal cattle off Dad. And yet you can't help liking the son-of-a-gun. He turned around and used most of the money from the cattle he'd stole to buy Dad and Mom presents."

With the first trace of dawn they let their horses drink from one of the pools of rain water, after which they were fed with the oats, carried on their saddles. While their horses ate, they squatted on the wet ground to munch bread and meat, Blue Lake muttering because he couldn't have hot coffee.

Not far away was a little rocky hill, shaped something like a big stone boat, and Kirby took his glasses and headed for it. Gail went with him, striding through the cool morning. The sun was rising behind the distant range, battling to dissolve a cloud bank left from the storm.

After they had climbed the hill, Kirby used the glasses, but the light was still too hazy, with fog rising from rain-soaked earth. They sat side by side on a rock, waiting for the light to get better.

In half an hour Gail, using the glasses, found a faint thin column of smoke to the east—smoke that might be from the campfire of a prospector or of the rustler gang halting for coffee and bacon.

Tensely they waited until finally Kirby could make out a little clump of dots near the fire, undoubtedly cattle.

Gail took a long look, nodded and glanced at Kirby.

"Only thing that worries me now," he said, "is that you're along with us."

He put his arm about her and drew her close. Her lips were suddenly warm against his, then quickly she drew away.

"I don't know why I let you do that," she said.

His arm tightened. "I'm glad you had the last word and came along, Gail. Been wanting to kiss you and I just now had the courage to try it."

"Good training in courage for fighting rustlers?" she teased him. "Kirby, you won't take any chances?"

"I'll only shoot if I can find a hole so deep they'd have to blast me out of it to hit me," he promised. "And you're going to be in an even deeper one than that."

"General Kirby Grant," she said mockingly. "Got your campaign all planned out, have you? Why didn't you want Lon Teft to go along?"

He glanced at her. "You catch on quick to what's none of your business. Maybe we didn't want a stock detective with us; he'd cramp our style. They shot at Ma Battles and Poke and the boys. Blue and the others have got mighty fond of the Battles family. They'll be shooting to kill."

TOGETHER they descended the hill, and again the little party got in motion, keeping to the long sink made by the chain of marshes and alkali flats. They rode at a lope, roughly parallel to the course of the stolen herd and heading for the chain of low hills. Arriving a little past noon, they halted on the far side of the nearest hill and settled for a wait. The herd of cattle and loose horses was four and five miles away, traveling steadily at a course that would take them close to the waiting group.

They rested their horses, looked to their guns and cooked up their plan of attack. They counted seven men with the herd, one riding at point, three along the flanks, three on the drags. As they came into closer range of the glasses, Old Man Bowers remarked that he had seen most of the drivers in Yellowrock at various times.

According to plan, Blue Lake and Jim Peebles opened fire from the arroyo at the men on the drags. Those riders dismounted instantly, got down behind their horses to fire in return, while the other herders spurred back to take the attackers on the side. It was to be a battle, Kirby realized. These rustlers were too tough to give up without a fight.

He let the four men riding back get to an open space where there was no cover before he and the Wilsons rode out from behind the hill. After racing a hundred yards, they halted to fire from their saddles. The range was a little long, but the four rustler horsemen were broadside targets. One horse went down, and another rider, hit hard, clutched his saddle horn tightly, lost control of his mount which turned toward the loose horses and two mules that had been driven with the cattle. Just as the man reached the horses, he fell from his saddle.

The shots from Kirby's group were a shock to the rustlers. Abandoning the herd, the men raced through the cattle, trying to make it to a little hillock that offered cover. As they rode they fired back hotly at Kirby and the Wilsons, the only attackers offering themselves as targets.

Kirby had foreseen this retreat and had placed Old Man Bowers in a place to use his long-barreled rifle to advantage. Bowers' first shot, sent at a range measuring nearly half a mile, emptied another saddle. The man landed and lay still, while his horse galloped off with flopping stirrups, providing a mount for the dismounted rustler who managed to catch the animal. Again the rustlers dismounted and used their horses as barricades while they emptied their guns, the booming crash of the rifles echoing heavily from the hills.

Kirby's group spurred hard to get to the west of the raiders, hoping to get

them in a crossfire. A shot nicked the hide of Len Wilson's horse, causing him to put on an extra burst of speed. The rustlers, finding themselves under fire of three sets of guns and realizing that they ran the danger of being surrounded, began a quick retreat.

Gail's carbine had joined in the firing. The range was too short for the saddle gun, but it added to the noise, helped decide the rustlers to hurried flight. They streaked off, riding low over their saddle horns and were soon specks in the distance.

There was no profit in pursuing them. When the fugitives were a mile away, Kirby rode back to one of the men who had fallen, found the man, face red with blood, trying to raise his rifle.

"Drop it!" ordered Kirby. The man cursed heatedly but dropped the gun. Blue Lake and Jim Peebles had ridden to the other fallen man and found him lifeless.

The wounded man was put on the rustler horse with the empty saddle; the dead man they tied to one of the captured horses. After that they turned the herd. The cattle were tired, but the men and Gail pushed the animals along unmercifully, heading at dark down into a little circular depression where they would be easy to hold. Half of the men were on guard during the night, which was uneventful.

"I'm riding north," declared Kirby after breakfast. "Somewhere around the dunes is where they've got those cattle hidden."

"Why don't you take Blue and some of the men with you?" Gail asked.

"Harder for 'em to see one man than two," explained Kirby. "And there's lots of sandstorms up there to dodge around in."

Gail rode with him for some distance. Kirby found himself telling her a good part of the reasons why he'd come to Yellowrock.

"No further," he told her at last, stopping his horse after half a mile. "First thing I know you'll talk yourself into going all the way with me. I'll be back in a few days. Nothing to worry about if I don't come back for a week."

"You don't mean that!"she exclaimed. "I couldn't wait a week."

He leaned over, took her by the shoulders. "All right. I won't be a week. I couldn't stay away a week after that kiss yesterday. Wish me luck."

"I'll be praying for that—not just wishing it," Gail told him.

AGAIN Kirby Grant was approaching the freakish phenomenon of the area heaped with mile on mile of huge brown sand. It made a strange night ride, as he journeyed along the north side, a ride that Kirby would never forget.

He fed his horse the rest of the oats he had carried on the saddle, and ate some biscuits and meat, washed down

by water from his canteen. He had heard a cow bawling below and he tied his horse back in the brush and on foot climbed the dune for a looksee, taking his rifle and glasses.

Below the two old craters and the high dunes piled up under them made in effect a little cayon in which bunch grass grew, apparently straight from sand. On it grazed numerous cattle.

Farther below he saw green bushes that indicated water. Here the canyon had been formed through the protection given by the craters from wind currents which had freakishly built up high ridges. He was several miles from the north boundary line of the dunes area. The little canyon with its growth of grass was like a long greenish lake in a great mass of sand.

The cattle were in fair shape, almost as good those he and Gail Camlin had brought to the walled valley. Most were mature stuff, steers, dry cows, the quality dependent on the breeding stock of the various owners.

He went back to his horse and rode down from the sand canyon to the green brush where he found a pool of water from which his horse drank. After filling his canteen he went on, finding more cattle, a lot of them, and reading brands. Old Man Bowers had brought several brands in his bunch and had told Kirby what they were. Many of the cattle bore the marks Bowers had mentioned. The rest were almost altogether from Kirby's home country, the Prietos.

His father's cattle Kirby could recognize without brands or earmarks; he had seen them grow from calves. There were others owned by neighbors of the Grant family, several of Dan Shaw's and a lot of Long Y's, owned by the rancher for whom Blue Lake worked. All told there were over two hundred head.

Riding along this he could smell smoke, and a little below he saw a dugout in a sandy hill, with a rusty stove pipe sticking out of the dirt roof. Nearby were corrals made of brush, for poles would have had to be dragged many miles.

As he watched he saw two men emerge from the dugout and walk to the corral which contained a few horses. Kirby identified these two as belonging to the group caught with the herd stolen from the walled valley. One of the pair had his arm lumpily bandaged to the elbow.

Kirby hastily withdrew, knowing there was too much danger here of being seen. But he was not done. He was a thorough sort and his mission was only partly finished if he did not find how many head were held here. To make such a scout in open daylight was dangerous, but he judged it worth the risk. The wind was already kicking up sand on the ridge-like dunes. The storm would help in escaping observation.

He moved across another ridge, counting nearly two hundred in the next canyon. He had, he judged, a half mile to go to get out of the dunes and into open country when a hunch of sudden danger caused him to swing to the ground suddenly, yanking out his rifle. An instant later a gun boomed and Kirby's bay horse leaped violently, almost tearing the reins from his hand.

Half a dozen men were coming down on him, riding out of a cloud of flying sand. A shot which grazed his horse had come from another direction, however, and Kirby, swinging his rifle about, saw a single dismounted horseman on the opposite slope. He fired over his saddle, too fast for accuracy, but luck was with him and he scored a hit. The dismounted man flung up his arms, falling back just before a curtain of sand swept over him, while Kirby whirled to empty his rifle at the charging riders.

Kirby raced on, the bay under him running faster than Kirby had ever seen him go. Evidently the first bullet that had sliced the animal's hide acted as spur. For nearly half a mile Kirby raced, hoped to get into the protecting cloud of the storm raging in the dunes ahead. Before him was a gap in the high ridge, a little pass. If he got through that, he would be temporarily out of range of the shots and have time to lose himself in the storm.

His horse slowed in climbing the last slope, and then a club seemed to strike Kirby's left arm, sending a numbing shock through his whole body. Next instant his horse was going down. The animal had also been hit. The bay went down to its knees and rolled over as Kirby got off. He was able to use his left arm as a lame support for the rifle to fire again at the horseman.

He waited for another strong gust. Then, stopping only to snatch the canteen from his saddle, he ran on into the dense sand cloud that filled the pass.

He hurtled down a steep slope in swirling sand so thick he could not see a yard ahead, and stepped suddenly out into open space, falling over one of the infrequent, sharp-rimmed little cliffs left by the wind. He landed after what seemed like seconds of falling, hitting heavily on a little sand dune.

The sand sifted over him relentlessly. He had just enough consciousness left to protect his mouth and nostrils from the smothering blanket by pulling his jacket up over his head. After that he lay still with sand continuing to pile over him, coating him to the color of the small dune on which he lay.

Men riding to hunt him passed not thirty feet away, looking over the edge of the little cliff from which he had fallen without detecting the figure below.

For a long time Kirby lay where he had fallen, while blood from his punctured arm soaked the sand. He couldn't stay here and the only way to travel was afoot. He started what he knew would be a long walk, maybe too long for him.

The stage road lay to the west. If he kept his directions and was able to continue traveling, he would hit that road and might be able to stop a stage to Yellowrock.

X

WITHOUT trouble, Gail and the men returned the stolen cattle to the pasture in the walled valley. There they found Poke Battles limping about, swearing revenge against cattle thieves. He rejoiced blasphemously on hearing details of the vengeance exacted on the gang that had put a bullet in his leg.

Gail cut out another bunch of her cattle to drive them, with the help of Old Man Bowers, to the Spratt abattoir on the river. But Gail could take little interest in the business. Her mind was on Kirby Grant who had been foolhardy enough to venture alone into country where he was sure the rustler band had its headquarters.

The two rustlers, one badly wounded and the other dead, were brought in to Yellowrock by Blue Lake. Marshal Grudd listened to the story of the battle and said he'd hold the wounded man until Sheriff Dawes' arrival, the officer being expected that day.

Yellowrock itself paid little attention to the cattle raid. Miners were interested in digging for gold, and in cattle only as a source of beef. Who owned the cattle before they became beef did not concern them.

The firm of Heyden and Gormack continued to keep its market open although, competing with the low prices of Jack Spratt and Gail Camlin, the pair did little business. Which did not seem to worry them. And Heyden, Spratt gloomily reminded Gail, was an old-time gambler who wouldn't be advertising the cards in his hand.

Lon Teft came into the market and perched himself on a counter the evening of the day that Gail returned.

"So my help wasn't wanted chasing rustlers," he complained. "I figured Kirby's pals lamed my horse to get rid of me. When I rode out to the valley on another horse that night, I found you hadn't gone there at all. Gave me the slip."

"Why, what could make you think that?" Gail asked innocently.

"I heard there was a big fight," Teft went on.

"Yes, seems there was a little ruckus," Gail admitted carelessly.

"If I'd been there," boasted Lon, "none of those polecats would have got away."

"I'm busy, Lon," stated Gail, "counting cash."

"You know, Gail," went on Lon, ignoring her hint, "I've looked around for a long time for a girl like you. I'm starting me a ranch, a big outfit."

"Buying that big range and cattle on the salary of a stock detective?" Gail asked.

"Nope. That's only chicken feed. I've got a fourth interest in a gold mine up on Jack's Creek. Won it in a poker game." Lon's dark eyes were ardent. "I'd admire to have you as partner on that ranch, Gail."

Lon Teft for once seemed in earnest, or as earnest as that light-hearted fellow ever got. Gail probably should have felt flattered at a proposal from the handsome stock detective who was said to be favorite of all the Yellowrock dancehall girls. If she was flattered, however, she concealed it well.

"I'm counting cash, Lon," she repeated. "I haven't thought about marriage."

"Think about it now," he urged. "There's always a time when a sort of wild bronc like me can turn out okay if he has the right kind of help. I've done a few things in my life I'm sorry for. Kirby told you all about them, I guess."

"Kirby never said anything about you. He's not the gossiping sort. He's different from you in that way, Lon."

"So that's it?" said Lon shrewdly. "It's Kirby I reckon you aim to pull double harness with. But I'm warning you, I'm not quitting to Kirby. I still got a lot of chips in the game."

"And you've got a cold deck or two ready to slip into that game, Lon?" she asked.

"Sure," he admitted frankly. "When you're playing for high stakes, what's a cold deck or two?"

He wandered out, whistling, and Gail looked after him. Lon Teft, she decided suddenly, might be a lot smarter than he seemed.

SHE WENT to the door for a breath of fresh air and to look along the street, just in case Kirby Grant should be riding along it. There was no one but the usual run of miners and Liam Heyden strolling along, puffing on a cigar.

Peggy Shane passed by with her nose in the air, pretending that she did not see Gail. Gail wished that the plump little ranch girl were friendly.

Peggy's father was, unlike his daughter, cordial to Gail. Kirby had told her that Shane's real name was Shaw and that he was head of the Prieto cattlemen's organization which had sent Kirby to Yellowrock with the supposedly stolen bunch of cattle.

Liam Heyden crossed the street to stop and talk to Gail, flinging his cigar away and standing bare-headed with a gallantry rare to Yellowrock.

"You folks had quite a battle with rustlers, I understand," he remarked. "I congratulate you on getting back your cattle."

"I thought you'd hope we lost them," she said directly.

He shook his head. "Everyone thinks that we're against any competition to our business, but Bill and me, we've wished you and Mr. Spratt luck from the first. Anyway, you'll soon be out of cattle to butcher. We'd like to have Spratt's market and I'll tell you what we'll do—buy his fixtures at a good price and pay you for the cattle you have left, closing the deal tomorrow. After all, you won't be able to do business if you haven't got cattle to butcher."

"Neither can you," she pointed out.

"We think we can get cattle one way or another."

"We think we can manage to get them too."

"And so you aim to operate all winter?" Heyden shook his head again. "I wouldn't do that. You've got rid of almost all of your cattle at a good price. Better quit now," he added, with a hint of a threat in his voice. "But you know your own business. You've heard nothing of your uncle?"

"No," Gail said, surprised that Heyden knew of her search for Starr Camlin.

"I think you may hear about him before long," he said, the ghost of a smile on his thin lips. "By the way, you haven't seen any of our Yellowrock Miners' Courts operate, have you? They're held up on Gallows Hill, a trial with a judge and attorneys for prosecution and defendant. Then all the miners vote whether the man is to be hanged or turned loose."

Gail shivered. "It's not human."

"Miners like to see a miscreant found guilty and punished on the spot. You'll remember the signal for a Miners' Court, won't you? Two blasts, a half minute or so, and then two more. It is something you'll think back on the rest of your life. I got a hunch you'll soon be hearing that signal."

He bowed and went on, leaving Gail shivering with a dread that came whenever she glanced up to the yellow slope and saw the high frame of poles and cross bars that had served as gallows.

Another day passed slowly while she watched vainly to see Kirby ride back into town. She had told the Battles boys at the valley to ride into Yellowrock immediately if Kirby should return there first.

Working in the market in the late afternoon rush, making change for customers, she suddenly sat transfixed. Two explosions had sounded on the slope above the city, powerful enough to make the windows rattle. This pair of explosions was different from the blasts used in mining and had come from the direction of Gallows Hill. Gail waited, holding her breath, recalling the talk with Heyden. Approximately half a minute and again two blasts came.

She looked at Jack Spratt and the butcher nodded soberly. "Miners' Court. They're going to try some poor devil and likely hang him."

THEIR heavy boots clumping loudly on the sidewalk, miners began drifting past. Old Man Bowers hurried in. "Those cussed miners are holding another trial. Bringing in two men that killed a prospector and jumped his claim up on Squaw Peak, I hear."

Gail stepped outside. It was a murky day with clouds hanging low over the mountains above Yellowrock. Traffic had stopped along one end of Main Street to allow passage of a wagon in which two men stood. The wagon had no side boards, and as the men were thrown about they almost fell from the vehicle. Gail suddenly saw that the pair's hands were tied behind their backs. The driver sat in front on a low seat. Half a dozen bearded miners followed on horseback, carrying rifles across the pommels of their saddles, evidently acting as escort for the two prisoners.

Gail gave a sharp cry as she stood on the sidewalk, frozen eyes fixed on the wagon. For one of the two prisoners who swayed with the jolting of the vehicle was her uncle, Starr Camlin!

As the wagon came abreast, Gail rushed into the street, calling to the driver. He pulled back on the lines of his team so hard that the two prisoners were almost spilled to the ground.

Starr Camlin stared down at the girl. "Gail!" he cried hoarsely. "Gail!"

At the sound of his voice the girl forgot that Starr Camlin had quit the drive to let her come to Yellowrock alone, burdened with his cattle in addition to her own.

"What happened, Uncle Starr?" she demanded. "Quick! Tell me."

"They accuse us of killing a man and stealing his claim," stated Starr Camlin dully. "I swear we're not guilty, but they found the body of the man buried on an abandoned claim we took over. We never seen the fellow. They gave us a trial up there, but we had no chance. I don't know why they picked on me and my partner. Our claim didn't show enough gold to make anyone want to get rid of us."

"The cattle you bought—why didn't you ever come to claim them?"

"I went crazy over gold. Just went crazy. I thought I had a chance to make millions and it got to be such a fever that a few cattle meant nothing. Tell your aunt I didn't do it. Don't let her and the

children think I was a murderer and a thief. I went crazy over gold, but not that crazy. I been a no-good all my life and hanging is what I deserve. But not for a killing I never done."

Gail was crying. This was her father's older brother, a ne'er-do-well he had helped many times. Starr had nothing mean in him. He was just weak.

The blasts were still sounding. One of the armed riders came up to the wagon. "What's holding this up?" he bellowed. "Git a-going. Let's git this over with."

The wagon went on. Gail stood on the street with the tears flowing down her cheeks, looking after the vehicle and the mounted guards. One of them, she realized abruptly, she knew. It was the bulky-bodied partner of Liam Heyden, Bill Gormack.

WITH PROBABLY minutes only measuring the time left to her uncle before he mounted the trap of the gallows on the hill, Gail Camlin cast about desperately for possible help. She considered first of all Marshal Henry Grudd, the representative of the law in Yellowrock. She hurried to the jail opposite the Bonanza Palace and found Grudd sitting in his office smoking a pipe.

"They're going to lynch my uncle, Starr Camlin," said Gail.

"Yes," Grudd said quietly, "I've just heard that." There was nothing encouraging in the marshal's manner.

"But he's not guilty. Heyden told me only yesterday that I'd soon be hearing the summons for the Miners' Court. And he told me I'd soon have word of my uncle. Bill Gormack came riding in just now with the men bringing Uncle Starr to Yellowrock. He's been out engineering this."

"That's possible," admitted Grudd. "I'm sorry, but this is beyond me. I keep order in the town. The miners respect my authority in disturbances in Yellowrock, while I've promised hands off in these Miners' Courts."

Gail was shocked by his callousness. "You're not going to let them hang a man who's been framed?" she asked.

"I can do nothing. I wish I could, Gail. You see," went on Grudd. "I had a family once, wife and daughter. My wife died, leaving our little girl. I took her from town to town where I worked as marshal. She was only eighteen when she died nursing a typhoid epidemic in a cowtown. You reminded me of her from the first time I saw you. You have her courage and independence. My life is nothing that I care especially to hang on to. I'd do anything for you that was possible. But nothing is possible.

"Nothing is possible," repeated Grudd now on his feet, "but it won't hurt to try. Stay here," he ordered and opened the door into the street.

Men appeared there instantly, a half-dozen grim-faced miners holding rifles.

"Stay in your office, Marshal," said one. "This is no concern of your'n. We was warned you might try to interfere in Miners' Court. You're too good a marshal to lose through trying such foolishness. They'd just hang you alongside them two men."

Gail put her hand on the marshal's arm. "I can see now," she said, "your hands are tied."

She hurried distraught along the street. Men were still flocking toward Gallows Hill, some stopping in saloons for drinks, others carrying liquor bottles which they emptied as they walked along.

Gail realized that there was no chance to appeal to these men on grounds of either mercy or legality. Once her uncle and his partner were condemned, nothing could save them from death.

She went on and someone blocked her way—Liam Heyden, standing outside of the Heyden-Gormack meat market.

"Those blasts don't sound nice, do they?" he asked.

She looked at him with loathing. "You were behind all this!

"Your partner, Spratt, is in the office," he said. "We haven't got much time. What it is worth to get your uncle free?"

"Everything," she admitted.

"Then come in," he said. "But hurry."

Jack Spratt, in his white butcher's apron, was standing sober-faced in the Heyden-Gormack office.

"We're up against it, Gail," he said. "You can't let your uncle be hanged."

"You've made a lot of money from your cattle that have been slaughtered, Miss Camlin," said Hayden. "Spratt, you've made enough to go back to San Francisco and buy a meat market. You two are in our way. You've caused us trouble, but we're willing to forget that. Gormack and I will buy your cattle, Miss Camlin, at our original offer—two cents a pound. We'll buy Spratt's market at a fair price. And in return, I'll see that your uncle escapes hanging."

Gail looked at Spratt. "I can't let you lose your business."

The butcher shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I have no business. It's a business on the edge of a cliff—one shove and it's over. They could have us burned out any night. This way we can quit with some money."

Gail wished that Kirby Grant was here to advise her. But the ominous sound of the blasting came again. She called to Heyden.

"We'll quit," she told him.

"I already have bills of sale written out for the cattle and the market," said Heyden. "You two sign and leave them with Marshal Grudd to hold with the understanding that when your uncle's freed, Grudd hands us the papers."

Gail nodded and scratched her signature on the bill of sale for the cattle, and Spratt signed away his meat market. Spratt took the bills of sale down to Grudd's office while Gail hurried up the hill, passing the last stragglers going to the meeting.

HUNDREDS of miners squatted or sat about the rough little amphitheater below the tall posts and crossbar which had been used as gallow after other Miners' Court meetings.

There was a heavy murmur of voices. On a little elevation were some benches on which sat a dozen men, including the prisoners.

As Gail hurried up one of the men who had acted as escort for the wagon arose to speak. A messenger had just come from the camp on Squaw Peak, he explained. A doctor from Yellowrock had just finished an autopsy of the murdered man, had found that he had come to his death from pneumonia. Which cleared the two accused men.

The miners were reluctant to accept the dismissal of the cases against the two. Some few who hungered to see a hanging yelled that influence had been used to free them. They were not satisfied until the doctor himself was brought into the court to state publicly that the post-mortem examination had showed no signs of violence, that the man had died of pneumonia and evidently had been buried on his claim by unknown miners who had left for other camps.

Gail could easily guess what Gormack had done. He had shrewdly used the dead miner to work up a case against Starr Camlin and his partner, holding back the doctor's report of natural death until Heyden had forced Gail and Spratt to sign the bills of sale.

Gail went up to Starr Camlin who stood dazed by his unexpected good fortune. "You arranged this, didn't you, Gail?" he asked.

"It was hard to arrange," she told him and explained the deal with Heyden and Gormack.

"I'll try to make it up to you, Gail," stated her uncle. "I swear I'll never gamble again. I'm going home broke, but I'll go home at least with an unbroken neck. They told me that those B-in-a-Box cattle I bought were stolen. Was that true?"

"Yes," said Gail, not telling him how close she had been to arrest because of those cattle. "We'll head back home with our horse and wagon as soon as possible. I think the Battles family plans to stay here. Poke wants to prospect. I've paid them the wages we promised, but I'm going to double them, for Poke was shot in the leg a few days ago defending my cattle. You'd better ride out to my camp and tell Poke to let Hey-

den's men have what's left of my cattle. Tomorrow we'll arrange to leave. Or as soon as we can," she added, thinking of Kirby Grant. She wasn't quitting this Yellowrock country until he too could leave.

Grudd, she found, had given the signed bills of sale to Heyden, and the two partners were sending men out that night to get Gail's cattle.

At dark Gail saw the stagecoach halt in front of the Bonanza Palace Hotel. The driver descended to help out one of his passengers, Kirby Grant, who wore a blood-soaked bandage on his left arm. He was plainly in a daze and so weak he was unable to stand alone.

Kirby looked fixedly at Gail who had rushed up, and forced a grin. "Got back all right," he mumbled. "Everything's going to be all right." After that he shut his eyes and started to slump to the ground.

Old Man Bowers and Spratt had rushed over to the coach, and they and Gail took Kirby into the hotel. The ablest doctor in Yellowrock was hastily summoned.

A few minutes later he gave his verdict. "Bullet went through the fleshy part of his arm. Not serious, but he lost a lot of blood and seems dazed. Maybe got his head scraped by a bullet or maybe he fell from his horse. No concussion or fracture. Knowing his tough cowboy breed, I'd say that by tomorrow morning he'll be up and yelling for his horse and saddle. Or else he'll be a mighty sick hombre."

XI

KIRBY GRANT came slowly out of a deep sleep, to lie quietly for a few moments, wondering how he had gotten into bed. Without turning his head he could see an ornate gas chandelier, which, with a marble-topped washstand and dresser, identified the room as one in the Bonanza Palace Hotel.

As he stirred a little, someone sitting in a horsehair chair at the head of the bed stood up. It was Gail Camlin, her blue eyes still heavy with sleep.

"How do you feel?" she asked, bending over him.

"How'd I get here?" he wanted to know. "Last I remember I was on a stagecoach talking to some pretty girl in a cowboy hat."

"Yes, and you feel asleep while talking to her," said Gail.

Jack Spratt, who had been snoring in another chair near the window, sat up, greeted Kirby cheerfully and raised a curtain. A rifle was propped against Spratt's chair.

It was daylight and Kirby frowned. "You two been here all night?" he demanded. "What for?"

"Because you needed us," Gail said severely. "The doctor fixed up your arm and came to see you twice during the night. He said you'd either wake up a whole lot sicker, or yelling for your clothes and your horse."

"I'd like my duds but I won't be yelling for my horse," he said grimly. "They shot him and hit me in the arm, the inhospitable buzzards. I was hightailing it out of there in a sandstorm when I fell off a dune that was all of thirty feet high. But it was worth the trouble, seeing what I saw. Found a lot of cattle grazing up there right in the middle of the biggest sand pile west of the Sahara Desert."

"Found 'em, did you?" said Spratt. "Many cattle?"

"Yeah. Over eight hundred head—maybe a thousand. Two hundred that were stolen from Old Man Bowers. Almost all the rest belong to my dad and other ranchers in the Prietos. Same men were in charge that drove our cattle out of the walled valley. We'll grab the cattle from those rustlers and keep the 'Jack Spratt—Fat Meats' market runningly. "How come?"

"That would be nice," said Gail, "except that Mr. Spratt and I have quit business. Sold out to Heyden and Gormack."

"Sold out!" Grant repeated wonderingly. "How come?"

She told him of the deal by which Starr

Camlin had been saved from a hangnoose. Kirby listened, asking a question now and then, his face getting more and more grim.

"That would be the kind of play they'd make," he growled. "So you're out of business and your cattle sold, too? The cussed robbers! But we'll find some way to market those cattle. First thing is to get hold of them. I figure Dan Shaw can talk the sheriff into sending out a posse to help us grab 'em."

Gail chuckled. "That's a good sign that you're fit to be up. The doctor said a few hours' sleep is all a tough cowboy needs to cure anything outside of a broken neck. I believe it now. And you don't think losing the meat market is serious."

TO A RANCH GAL

I hear that you can ride a hoss,
And make a trail herd go—
I know you rope just like a man,
But tell me, can you sew?

They say you're quite a ranch hand, too,
And certainly good-looking—
I know that you can shoot a gun,
But how about your cooking?

—Pecos Pete

"Serious enough. But you sold most of your cattle at a big price and we'll get that market back. I've got an interest in all those rustled Prieto cattle. The agrement was that I get a fourth of all the stolen stock I recover. I'm giving Blue Lake and the rest a split of my share, and with the money we get from the sale of these cattle we'll go back to the Prietos to buy a trail herd to bring here."

GAIL shook her head. "Before you do anything except eat breakfast, the doctor has to have a look at you and your arm. But Kirby, I know there's trouble ahead. Why not go home and get some of your neighbors to ride here and help get their cattle back? You're up against a bunch too big to handle alone, even if Dan Shaw persuades Dawes. It's not just the rustlers. After you've fought them, you'll have Heyden and Gormack to handle. I don't think much of Shaw. He's been spending all his time here gambling with Lon Teft and other men. He'll be no help in licking rustlers or the Heyden-Gormack pair."

"But we'll take on those buzzards one bunch at a time. Finish the rustlers first. There's no time to send to the Prietos for help."

Old Man Bowers had come into the room to hear the last exchange of remarks between Kirby and Gail.

"Got the world by a tail with a downhill pull, have you, young feller?" he asked dryly. "I'm telling you, you're due to come to grief. I know Yellowrock better'n you. But not better'n you'll know it 'fore you're done."

"Cheer up, old-timer," said Kirby. "Found two hundred head of your lost cattle out in the sand dunes."

"Two hundred head!" exclaimed Bowers. "You mean it? Two hundred— I'm rich! No, I ain't. Those cows are all same as a thousand miles off."

"Sure, I know, we're licked before we start," broke in Kirby. "What is this —a funeral? Order breakfast for all of us up here. A two-pound steak for me. And send for Dan Shaw. I want a long palaver with him."

Shaw, summoned by Old Man Bowers, took his time coming, arriving an hour after Kirby, Gail, Bowers and Spratt had finished breakfast in Kirby's room. The rancher, dressed in his ex-

pensive new black broadcloth suit, shook hands with Kirby.

"Found between eight hundred and a thousand head," Kirby told the rancher, after the others had left them alone. "About all of the stolen cattle from the Prietos—Dad's, some of yours, the Long Y's and the rest. With two hundred head of Old Man Bowers'."

"You mean it?" said Shaw, astonished. "You're sure you saw all those cattle?"

"Of course," said Kirby impatiently. "They shot my horse, so I know I wasn't dreaming. You get Sheriff Dawes to deputize all of us as a posse, and we'll grab those cattle, drive 'em down here and slaughter them to sell in Yellowrock."

Shaw still seemed unconvinced. "It's hard to believe. Lon Teft swore no cattle could be up in that sand dune country. Been over every foot of it, Lon said. How many head of mine did you see?"

"At least twenty."

"Too few to bring me much money," said Shaw thoughtfuly. "I've spent a lot of money staying here in Yellowrock."

"Must be adding to your gambling losses, too, aren't you, Dan?" asked Kirby. "Forget your expenses. I'm depending on you to get Sheriff Dawes behind us."

"I'll see Sheriff Dawes," agreed Shaw. "I understand he's just established an office here in Yellowrock, taking over the city jail for headquarters. Plans to stay here after this. But we'll have to move slowly."

"What for?" snapped Kirby. "If we give those buzzards time to scatter that herd, we'll never get them at all. We've got to move quick. Hustle, Dan. Go see Dawes."

SHAW had been gone perhaps a quarter of an hour when Lon Teft breezed in to find Kirby shaving. Well, how are you, Kirby?" he inquired. "So they almost got you out in those dunes? Winged you, did they?"

"Not bad," said Kirby, and waved his bandaged arm.

"See any cattle?"

Kirby ignored the question and said, "There's one thing that's been bothering me quite a while, Lon. I trailed you up there the other day, and when I got near the dunes someone took shots at me. Mighty close ones."

"You trailed me?" said Lon in surprise. "I was looking for those cattle myself. If you were shot at, some of those rustlers must of seen you. But I sure didn't see them. You don't think I would shoot at you, do you, Kirby?" Lon slapped Kirby's back. "You know me better'n that. Me, I'm a stock detective. Must of been a rustler that shot at you."

"If you say so, that's the way it was," said Kirby quietly.

He wanted to believe it. But rustlers would have shot to kill and the shots that had been fired at him were just as Lon would have fired them—to drive Kirby back.

"See any cattle?" asked Lon again, his dark eyes studying Kirby shrewdly.

"I saw a lot of sand," said Kirby. "And a storm so bad you couldn't see a cow if you'd been milking her."

Lon laughed carelessly. "Knew you wouldn't find any critters. No cattle in a hundred miles of those dunes. Wish there was. I'd be tempted to steal them myself."

Mid-morning passed and Kirby, waiting word from Dan Shaw, began to get impatient. Shaw was not in his hotel room, nor could Kirby locate him in the gambling houses he usually frequented. Out in the street again, he saw Sheriff Dawes approaching. The officer was a stocky, sandy-mustached man, with shrewd gray eyes.

"Kirby Grant?" he asked.

"Yeah." Shaw had seen the officer, Kirby guesed, and Dawes wanted to question him about the cattle in the dunes.

"You're under arrest, Grant," said the sheriff brusquely. "And don't try to get away or go for your gun if you're

wearing one. I've got a man covering you with a rifle from across the street. And this is a regular warrant."

"What's the charge?" asked Kirby.

"Cattle stealing."

"That could be serious," said Kirby, and grinned. "I guess you mean those cattle out in the walled valley that I drove here from the Prietos. But hasn't Dan Shaw seen you yet?"

"Yeah, he saw me," said the sheriff. "It was Shaw swore out the warrant against you. On account of those Prieto cattle you admit driving here."

Kirby had a sudden shock. "Shaw swore out a warrant, did he?" He couldn't understand it. Maybe Shaw had some reason for the warrant, but if so, Shaw should certainly have told Kirby about it first.

"Have to hold you in the city jail until I can send you to the county seat," said Dawes and took Kirby's gun. "I've taken over Marshal Grudd's boarding place."

"Go get Shaw," growled Kirby. "I'd like to talk with him. And I want to see Old Man Bowers, too."

"I'll let Shaw know you want to see him," said the sheriff with a hoarse chuckle. "But I wouldn't count on him coming to see you." He grinned and took Kirby into the jail office where a rawboned deputy sheriff occupied Marshal Grudd's chair.

"Watch him close," the sheriff warned the deputy. "Desperate hombre. With friends around town."

BEYOND a steel door lay a short corridor with half a dozen cells opening off it, each closed with barred doors. Kirby was put into the one at the end, a small box with only a cot for furniture.

He sat on the cot with rage at Dan Shaw growing in him. He had a faint hope that Shaw had some explanation for this, but after he had waited an hour without Shaw coming to see him, he gave up the hope. Nor did Old Man Bowers appear. Kirby guessed that the sheriff wasn't letting friends in to see him.

Finally the corridor door was unlocked by the big deputy and a visitor appeared, Liam Heyden. The deputy stayed at the end of the corridor, his hand on his six-shooter, keeping close watch on Heyden who moved close to the bars of Kirby's cell door.

"I guess," said Heyden, "you were running a little rannikaboo over on me and Gormack, telling us that you'd look for those rustler cattle for us. The news is out that you found 'em."

"I agreed to look for the cattle," returned Kirby, "but I didn't say I'd tell you where they were if I found 'em. I told you I'd talk over a deal. I'm ready to talk over that deal now. My deal is for you and Gormack to get the hell out of this country and give Spratt back his market and Gail Camlin her cattle"

"You're a cool one," said Heyden. "You had me fooled, but it's doing you no good. Shaw double-crossed you. The gamblers got to him and he's lost a lot of money. Now he's sold you out to throw in with the rustler gang. Better come in with us and in half an hour I'll have you turned loose and Shaw looking out of this cell."

Kirby Grant considered the offer for a moment. He could pretend to throw in with Heyden until he got his freedom. But even pretending to compromise with those two snakes was too high a price to pay for his release.

"It would be easy," hinted Heyden, "for a gang of men to break in here, say tonight, and take you up on Gallows Hill."

"I never thought I'd want to see a man hung," Kirby said recklessly, "but I think it would be a plumb pleasure to look at you kicking the air."

Heyden turned without a word and went out. The door clanged shut again and Kirby was left to himself.

A midday meal was sent him from the Bonanza Palace Hotel, ordered by Gail or Spratt, he guessed. Rain had started up again, drumming monotonously on the roof. Gail, Jack Spratt and Old Man Bowers had been right in their warnings. He was up against a tougher proposition

here in Yellowrock than he had ever guessed. And right now he was as helpless as a hogtied calf.

NEWS OF the arrest by Sheriff Dawes had come almost immediately to Old Man Bowers, who carried it to Gail Camlin. She realized instantly that the Prieto rancher, Dan Shaw, had either thrown in with the rustlers that morning or had been in cahoots with them all along. And if they had persuaded the sheriff to arrest Kirby, they would also get him to arrest the crew Kirby had brought with him—Blue Lake, Jim Peebles and the two Wilsons, even though they were in another county. If they were to escape arrest, the four must be warned, and at once.

She took an alley to the stable where she kept her horse and hastily saddled. Then, mounting, she struck out, heading straight for the walled valley. From the top of a ridge she could see a group of horsemen hurrying along the river road from Yellowrock. She counted ten men. They probably were a sheriff's posse sent out to arrest Kirby Grant's crew.

With her horse breathing hard from the race across the washboard of ridges, she came to the narrow canyon entrance to the walled valley. Looking back again as she rode into the narrow canyon, she saw the group strung out now, racing their horses. There came the distant crash of a rifle, then half a dozen others. The range was too great for the guns, but she spurred her horse, his hoofs clattering like thunder within the walls.

The spot where the wagon had been the center of the Camlin camp was vacant. Evidently the Battles family and her uncle had left early that morning. Heading into the pines, she came to Kirby Grant's camp where Blue Lake, Jim Peebles and the Wilson brothers were squatted around a cookfire.

"Get your horses and ride out," she said as she rode up. "Sheriff Dawes arrested Kirby. He's held in the Yellowrock jail."

"Arrested!" growled Blue Lake. "What for?"

"Cattle stealing. For taking this herd from the Prietos."

"But that's plumb loco!" said Blue. "We brought these cattle from the Prietos only as bait. The owners gave them to us to bring here to sell and use to get in with rustlers. Dan Shaw can explain all about that."

"It was Shaw that swore out the warrant," Gail explained bitterly. "You boys can do your swearing over that when you're out of here. There's a posse coming to arrest you. They're so close you can't ride down the canyon. But do you know the trail that the rustlers used in dropping in on us the first night?"

"Yeah, we found it," said Blue Lake. "But we feel a lot more like smoking up Dawes' posse. This isn't in his own county."

"No good of that," said Gail. "Leave the cattle. Let's slip out."

Their horses luckily were held in camp, in a rope corral near the Grant wagon. Each man saddled a horse and, leading another, headed for the far end of the valley where the trail the rustlers had used started up a precipitous wall. The trail was hidden by a thick growth of pines, but the posse, bursting into the valley, saw the horsemen just beginning the climb and spurred forward, firing a volley of wild shots.

Blue Lake stopped to empty his rifle, shooting over the heads of the riders, but not too high. The horsemen, abruptly changing their minds about trying to arrest the four cowboys, went back as fast as they had ridden forward. A little later they were seen retreating through the canyon.

"We'll ride into Yellowrock and pull down that cussed jail and get Kirby out," said Blue Lake as they stopped out on the ridge.

"No," said the girl, "you stay out. If you went in, you'd be arrested. Why don't two of you stay here to watch the cattle in the valley and the other two hole up on the slope in back of the Spratt slaughterhouse so we'll know where to reach you? If we can't get Kirby out

some way, we'll leave it to you to make the try. All right?"

Blue Lake nodded. "All right, you're the boss. Me and Jim will ride on, you Wilsons stay here. But we're not leaving Kirby behind bars long."

XII

SHE LEFT Blue and Jim Peebles two miles from town, then rode in to put up her horse at the stable. She knew she was in some danger of arrest, but she judged it small.

Passing the jail, she saw through a window a deputy sheriff on guard in the office Grudd had vacated. She found Spratt standing in front of his market, which Heyden and Gormack were taking over. Rain was falling, but the day was no more gloomy than Jack Spratt's face.

"No chance of getting Kirby out," he told her. "Bowers and me have been to see Sheriff Dawes. He won't even let us in to see Kirby, says he's taking Kirby over to the county seat tomorrow. Marshal Grudd has plumb disappeared. Some say he's resigned, sore account of Dawes taking over here. And Shaw ain't showed himself since the arrest."

"That's smart of him, especially if Blue Lake comes in to Yellowrock," Gail declared.

Leaving Spratt, she went directly to the Shaw rooms in the Bonanza Palace and knocked on the door, taking a chance that the rancher might be in. There was a stir inside and a male voice stopped talking. Not Shaw's; the rancher had a rather squeaky, high-pitched voice. But when the door opened only Peggy Shaw and her father were in the room.

Shaw glanced up nervously. "Oh, it's you, Miss Camlin? Won't you sit down?"

The door to the other room was closed. Gail was sure that someone had been in the room before she had knocked and had dodged into Peggy's room.

"How could you do a thing like this?" she demanded.

Shaw shook his head, as if forgiving Gail for her heated charge. "I knew you'd be against me. Kirby Grant is the kind that can make people believe him. My letter is on record, notifying authorities here that Grant was driving stolen cattle this way."

"If he was a rustler, why didn't you have him arrested as soon as you came to Yellowrock?" demanded Gail.

"I didn't want to to do that and I gave him a few days to get back the cattle," explained Shaw. "Told Kirby that since I was a neighbor of his father's, I'd let him get away if Kirby would deliver those cattle he'd stole. But he didn't bring them in, and I had to have him arrested."

"You're lying," she said hotly. "Lying."

"It's easy for a woman to call a man a liar," said Shaw. "It wouldn't be safe for a man to call me that to my face."

"Kirby would call you one to your face if you'd give him a chance. So would Blue Lake and Jim Peebles and the Wilsons. So would all the ranchers back in the Prietos. They all gave permission to Kirby to drive those cattle here. You'll have a lot to answer for, Mr. Shaw, if you don't turn him loose. Only a snake would do such a rotten trick."

Gail went out, slamming the door hard. At the end of the hall, she suddenly recalled the unexplained male voice in the room. Returning to stand by the door, she listened shamelessly.

Voices came out muffedly, but loud enough for her to identify one as belonging to the jovial stock detective, Lon Teft.

So he's in with Shaw, Gail thought. Or Shaw is in with Lon Teft.

She descended to the lobby, where Jack Spratt and Old Man Bowers sat on the leather easy chairs of the Bonanza Palace. Hastily she told them all that had happened.

The sky had been clouded all day. More rain began pouring down now, adding to the gloom of the trio.

"No doubt of it," said Spratt, "Shaw and Lon Teft are in cahoots. Teft

is undoubtedly in this rustler gang out in the dunes. After they've got Kirby out of the way they'll figure to get rid of Heyden and Gormack and run the meat business here in Yellowrock this winter."

"Blue and the rest want to come in and get Kirby out of jail," remarked Gail.

"Mighty dangerous for them and for Kirby, too," said Bowers. "There's an armed deputy in Grudd's office as guard, and he's a tough one. And Sheriff Dawes ain't never far away, to say nothing of two or three more deputies."

The rain was coming down harder now. Bowers and Spratt went out into it, too restless to sit still. Gail was hungry and went into the hotel dining room for coffee and a sandwich.

She was just finishing when Lon Teft came in to sit beside her.

"What did I tell you?" he said. "That Heyden and Gormack are smart. Now they've got Shaw to throw in with them. And of course they already had Dawes bought. They'll go up and grab those rustler cattle that I hear Kirby found. Shaw will make it all legal for them to do it. When the mess is over, Shaw'll have his cut, and Heyden and Gormack will clean up several hundred thousand dollars."

"What would you advise?" asked Gail, reluctantly admiring Lon Teft's ready explanation of Kirby's arrest.

"Thing to do," said Teft, "is to get Kirby out of that jail. Only way is to break him out. And it had better be done quick. He's still dangerous to Heyden and Gormack and they'll want to be rid of him. I've heard some talk around saloons of a lynch party late tonight—to take out Kirby and string him up on Gallows Hill. It's Heyden and Gormack, of course, planning it. He has to be gotten out of that jail tonight and that's what I'm planning to do —a couple hours after dark, before that lynch mob gets going."

"You're sure you can get him out?" asked Gail.

"It'll be easy for me," he said confidently. "I'll go now and get everything ready."

Gail looked thoughtfully after Lon Teft's tall person. Hunting up Spratt and Old Man Bowers, she told them of Lon Teft's plan to rescue Kirby.

Bowers shook his head. "There's ways that jailbreaks can be arranged to get rid of a prisoner. I once trusted Lon, but no more. He's a tricky coyote."

Gail came to a sudden decision. "Kirmust be gotten out, but we'll do it ourselves before Lon Teft can make his fake try. I think I have a scheme to get him out without any shooting."

THE REST of the afternoon was one steady rain which turned toward evening into a downpour. The rain suited Gail's plans. They had been contacted by Starr Camlin and had made arrangements accordingly. Old Man Bowers, making sure that he was not followed, had ridden down to notify Blue Lake and Jim Peebles of the part they were to take.

The rain would bring an early night, which was exactly as Gail would have ordered it, since it meant complete darkness by suppertime. She had a better idea than a raid on the jail—at least she hoped it was better. Spratt and Bowers had been dubious about her part in it, claiming it was too dangerous, but she had overriden their objections.

To help Gail's scheme, Jack Spratt had managed to secure a service tray from the Bonanza Palace Hotel dining room and had taken it to his room in a small hotel. Also, he had arranged for a wagon to be left in the street a few feet from the jail. Blue Lake was to have a horse waiting for Kirby in back of the Bonanza Palace. Old Man Bowers and Spratt were to be close to the jail, ready to lend aid if necessary. Blue and Jim were to ride in at dark, keeping off the main street, but be stationed close enough to aid in case of emergency.

At five-thirty when darkness came, Gail put on a dark dress and a white apron, the latter provided by Spratt.

The apron over her dress would simulate the uniform worn by the waitresses in the Bonanza Palace dining room. Her slicker was to go over this garb. In a pocket of the slicker she had the .32 revolver that she had brought on the trail drive.

After Kirby was freed, she and Starr Camlin would leave with the wagon, heading back to her uncle's family. And she would make Kirby leave too. It was better to lose a few cattle than to lose one's life.

She looked at her watch again, and then she went downstairs and through a side door into the darknes. The rain was still coming down steadily.

Old Man Bowers, enveloped in a yellow slicker, approached slowly, with just a nod of his head—the signal that all was clear, that the tray prepared by Jack Spratt was in the wagon, and only the one deputy in the little jail where Kirby was caged.

"Sheriff Dawes is in a bar down the street, murmured Bowers as he passed. "Looks like the coast is clear, but don't take chances. If we have to, me and Blue and the rest will just naturally sashay in with our guns and extract Kirby outa there."

"All right, if you have to. But it's better to get him out without anyone being hurt. One deputy wounded here and the law would follow us wherever we went."

Darkness brought a greater downpour, the rain drumming hard on streets that were already a quagmire churned by horse hoofs and men's boots. The few people on the street hurried to shelter.

Gail stopped before the wagon that stood near the jail. A tarp had been thrown over the back, and she slipped her hands under this and found the tray Spratt had left there.

She knocked on the door of the jail office and the deputy looked out through a rain-streaked window. Seeing it was a girl, he grinned toothily and unlocked the door. The deputy, a big fellow, had arrived in Yellowrock only that day and certainly would not identify her. He carried a six-shooter in a belt holster and his rifle stood against a desk. On the same desk sat a half-emptied bottle of whisky. After she had entered, the deputy carefully locked the door again.

"Well, well," he said, "bringing supper for a hungry deputy, are you?"

"No," she said. "This was ordered for a prisoner, Kirby Grant."

"Kirby Grant!" he snorted and whisked off a napkin to look at the array of dishes and the silver coffeepot. "All that fancy grub for a cow thief! Too good for him."

He turned his attention and his whisky-laden breath on Gail.

"A girl as purty as you oughtn't to be working rustling grub," he said. "Or you ought to be rustling it for one man. Me. Tell you what—I'm through here in half an hour. What say we go out somewheres and put on a li'l celebration?"

"I work until eight," Gail said hastily. "And I'm behind now. I've got to go back as soon as I deliver this to Mr. Grant. I was ordered to see that he got it."

"No hurry," he said. "How about a little kiss? You don't need to be skittish. Come on, le's you and me celebrate tonight."

"All right," she said, forcing a smile. "I'll meet you at the side dining room at eight. But if you want me to meet you on time, I've got to take this in to him and get back to work."

The delay until he produced a ring of keys was maddening, but the man couldn't be hurried. As he selected one, a key clicked in the lock of the street door. Gail glanced behind her and saw that Sheriff Dawes was entering.

Her heart sank. The sheriff would identify her at once and would guess why she had come in here. Dawes's face was still turned to the street and just before he stepped inside a shot crashed not far away. She guessed Old Man Bowers or Blue Lake had

fired it to lure the sheriff out of the office. It worked. The sheriff slammed the door shut and vanished, evidently to investigate the shot.

The deputy listened. Another gun roared.

"Please," Gail urged. "If I'm not through with my work, I can't meet you. I'll have to rush to get through as it is."

He laughed, pleased at her apparent desire to meet him, and still laughing fumbled with the key trying to find the hole in the lock. Locating it finally, he unlocked the door and swung it open.

BEYOND WAS a little corridor, with cells on each side and one at the end. All the cells had barred doors. One lamp provided a dim light.

"Supper for Kirby Grant," Gail called in her clear voice.

"That's me," said Kirby, his voice husky with surprise.

The deputy moved after Gail as she hurried forward. He was weaving a little as he walked. Evidently that bottle on the desk hadn't been the only one he had been drinking that afternoon. Again he fumbled, locating the keyhole to Kirby's cell door, while Gail waited in an agony of impatience, fearing that Sheriff Dawes might come in at any moment.

Just as he got the key in the hole, the deputy swung suddenly. "Seems to me I seen you in Yellowrock today. I 'member now. Dawes told me who you were—that cowgirl, Gail Camlin, what brung in a bunch of cattle and went in partnership with Jack Spratt. You ain't no waitress. I noticed your boots and I was sort of curious why a waitress would wear high-heeled boots," he continued, pleased with his astuteness. "Me, I ain't no fool. What you doing in here?"

Gail smiled at him and shoved the tray toward him. "Here, take this," she said, "and I'll show you."

Slow thinking with the whisky in him, the deputy took the tray in his hands. Promptly Gail slipped the revolver from her slicker pocket and cocked it.

Blinking in astonishment, the deputy stared at her while he stupidly continued to hold the tray. Then he said, "No girl is holding me up. You can go ahead and shoot."

Behind the deputy, Kirby reached a brown hand through the bars to slip the sixgun from the deputy's holster. He poked the deputy in the back with the barrel.

"If you won't be held up by a woman," Kirby drawled, "how'll I do? Move to the side, you," he ordered the deputy harshly.

The deputy, still foolishly holding the tray, stepped aside. While Kirby kept him covered, Gail used trembling fingers to turn the key in the lock, and Kirby stepped out and shoved the deputy into the cell and locked it.

"All right, you leave first," he told Gail. "I'll stroll out later, so if there's any trouble you won't be in shooting range."

Together they hurried down the corridor into the office.

"Dawes isn't far away," the girl told Kirby as he shut the steel door. "They got him out of here with a few shots, but he might come back. They have horses for you behind the Bonanza Palace. Hurry, Kirby, hurry."

Grant turned down the lamp in the office and took her in his arms. "You shouldn't have run this risk," he said. "You're getting out of Yellowrock."

"I don't have to be told that," she declared. "I'm leaving this town and I hope I never see or hear of it again."

He opened the door for her and she crossed the street, passing Old Man Bowers standing by the wagon. "Hustle," said Bowers. "Sheriff Dawes is due back."

Gail had crossed the street when Kirby, in a slicker borrowed from the deputy, stepped outside the jail. No one apparently noticed him, but as he reached the sidewalk in front of the Bonanza Palace, a voice bellowed.

"You, Kirby Grant! Halt!"

Instead of obeying, Grant darted unto the narrow passage beside the four-storied hotel and the adjoining building. He had barely disappeared when Sheriff Dawes pounded across the street with drawn six-shooter.

He fired once into the passageway, and in return came two shots, sent intentionally high. They were enough to drive Dawes back, bawling with all the force of his lungs that Kirby Grant had broken jail.

As Gail hurried down the street through the rain, Blue Lake appeared suddenly and strode along behind her as guard. Jim Peebles would be waiting with Kirby's horse, she guessed. Her own saddle horse was tied just around the corner, beside Old Man Bowers. Joined by Bowers and Blue Lake, Gail rode into the complete darkness off Main Street, from there heading out toward the Spratt abattoir where they would be safe for the moment.

On the way, Jim Peebles and Kirby caught up with them. Kirby dropped back alongside Gail.

"You took a mighty long chance," he said, "more of a chance than I was worth."

"No," she returned, "not more than you're worth, Kirby." Then she cried, "We've all of us got to leave this country—you, me, Bowers, your crew—all of us."

"That suits me," said Kirby. "The part at least about you leaving here. They're starting to play rough. But I've got to stay. We've just begun to fight." Gail opened her mouth to protest. But she didn't say anything when she saw the set to Kirby Grant's face. She knew he'd finish the fight.

XIII

DURING the time that Gail's herd had been held in the walled valley, Poke Battles had discovered a likely prospecting place some ten miles northwest. When Gail's uncle, Starr Camlin, had brought out word that the rest of Gail's cattle had been sold, Starr and Poke, with Ma and their two boys, had loaded up the Camlin wagon and driven to camp in a deserted cabin in the country where Poke wanted to prospect.

This cabin was chosen as rendezvous after the rescue of Kirby Grant from the Yellowrock jail. To it, in a drenching downpour, rode Gail, Kirby, Blue Lake, Jim Peebles, the Wilsons and Old Man Bowers. There had been no pursuit after the jail break. It was impossible in the rain and darkness.

After their arrival, Ma Battles busied herself cooking big skillets full of steaks in the fire place, while Poke prepared two big Dutch ovens of biscuits.

Meanwhile, the others were holding a sober consultation in one end of the room. Plainly they had reached a place where they had to fight or retreat from the Yellowrock country. They did not even consider the latter alternative.

Gail realized these men would never quit.

Kirby Grant said, "Nothing for us to do now but ride up and grab the cattle from those rustlers, then drive 'em down here and fight off the wolf pack Teft and Shaw and the Sheriff will sic on us. After we lick them, we'll have a real battle—against Heyden and Gormack."

"Why not," put in Gail, "find out what can be done by seeing the governor? To

try to get him to interfere."

"By the time the governor acts, those cattle will be steaks," returned Kirby. "He's been appealed to before, but we'll let you go to see the governor—you and Ma both. Maybe he might listen to you ladies. There's a night stage out of Yellowrock. You can board it at the first change station, it's not far from here. Meanwhile, the rest of us will go up to the dunes to get those cattle and drive them into the walled valley. But we ought to have more men."

"You're counting me in, of course," called Poke Battles. "And Joe and Pete." He nodded toward his young sons. "My leg is well enough for riding—as well at least as that slug-punctured arm of yours."

"We'll take you and the boys, but use the boys only to help with the cattle," said Kirby.

"I'll try to make a hand," said Old Man Bowers, "being that some of those cattle are mine." Starr Camlin volunteered likewise.

Kirby counted. "That makes us eight fighting men. Plenty to scatter those rustlers, but hardly enough for the storm that's due to break when we bring the herd down here. By that time Shaw and Lon Teft and Sheriff Dawes will have an army ready to grab 'em back again, with maybe Heyden and Gormack raising another army to take 'em from whichever bunch of us wins. Eight men can't hold that walled valley against gunmen that will be sent against us."

Starr Camlin spoke up. "I been in quite a few camps around Yellowrock. Run across cowmen and cowboys in each that's been hunting gold and got disgusted with it—plain homesick to get back to cows. If you offered 'em a small share in those cattle for wages, they could be counted on to fight to hold 'em. Some of them fellers are pretty hard men too. I could ride down and collect a few of 'em."

"We could sure use 'em," stated Kirby. "While we go up to get the cattle, Camlin, suppose you round up those cowhands and bring 'em up to meet us. I'll draw a map of the trail we'll take coming back."

AT THE fireplace Ma Battle straightened up. "Come and git it!" she called. "Such as 'tis."

They drifted over to fill plates and cups and squatted on the dirt floor to eat. Kirby and Gail sat side by side, balancing their plates on their knees.

"We didn't take any vote," said Kirby. "Didn't ask what you thought about this."

"Why should you?" she returned. "I know how you feel. This afternoon when you were held in jail, I prayed that we'd all just have a chance to get out of this Yellowrock country, but I know you'd never agree to that. Ma and I will go to see the governor. But I hate to think of the fighting ahead, Kirby."

"Me, too," he admitted frankly. "But you wouldn't want us to run, honey."

"No," she said quietly, "I wouldn't. You're not only fighting for the interest you have in those cattle, you're fighting too for your neighbors who own them."

The two had little appetite. The worries of the future loomed too high. Leaving their plates half emptied, they stepped outside where a shedlike porch protected them from the rain.

There she stood close to him, and with his one good arm he pulled her closer.

"I hate to see you go. I only wish I could go with you." She put her hands back of his head, pulled his lips down to hers. "Kirby, darn it, you take care of yourself."

The hammer of the rain, the cool blast of wind-ridden air that came from the hills faded for them both. The sky could have miraculously cleared to show the stars and moon, and they would not have noticed.

The door opened and Blue Lake stuck his head outside. "Done counting stars, you two?" he asked sarcastically. "We've et and we're rarin' to go."

A half-hour later they were all moving out, with Starr Camlin leaving them

to head south toward the camps to gather his gun recruits. The wagon had been loaded and the mules hitched to it. The vehicle was to be left at the stage station where the two women were to buy their tickets for the northbound coach.

Keeping the mules on a trot, they intercepted the early evening stage. Poke went into the change station with Gail and Ma to buy the tickets. The outgoing stages from Yellowrock were always loaded lightly, so there was no trouble in getting places.

They waited until the stage rumbled away with Gail and Ma. Then Kirby and his band rode northeast. They had a job ahead, for warning had very probably been sent to the rustler camp by Lon Teft. Which would mean that the rustler band would be on guard against attack.

Traveling fast, as day broke they saw the high barrier of the dunes. It had been a cold wet night. They halted in a wash and managed to get a brushfire built to boil coffee. Poke had bought a sack of oats at the stage station, and while their horses munched, the men drank hot coffee and ate a cold breakfast.

Kirby, to save time, decided to cross the dunes instead of circling them. Making the stiff climb to the high barricade, they journeyed on north through sweeping sand that was rising higher and higher, whipped by a wind that grew steadily in force with the hours.

As the storm increased in fury, they rode with neckerchiefs drawn over their faces. Coming to the little narrow valley lying west of the one in which Kirby had seen the dugout, the group halted. Blue Lake and the rest looked for the cattle eagerly, but in vain. The little trench between the high sand dunes was empty.

"Nary a head to be seen," growled Blue Lake. "I knowed it, Kirby. What you seen wasn't real cows. They was just part of one of these here desert meerages."

"I'll show you cattle," promised Kirby. "Mebbe they've done us the favor of rounding 'em up for us."

They angled into the little canyon, climbed a ridge and rode down the fissure-like valley in which Kirby had seen the rustler dugout and corrals. No cattle or horses were in sight. Buildings and corrals were deserted. But there were signs that cattle and horses had been there. There were fresh tracks in the soft dirt near the little pool where they watered their horses. Cattle had been gathered here, a lot of them, and evidently were being trailed along the canyon. Judging by the tracks, they could not be far away.

Kirby ordered Poke and his two boys to keep back out of bullet range. Then he and the other five rode on grimly, following the trail of the herd. Another bend in the canyon and ahead, climbing over a dune as big as a small mountain, was a long line of cattle. The head of the long line was out of sight, hidden by a tremendous wall of driving sand. No riders were to be seen.

"We're in luck," commented Blue Lake. "Them fellers been so plumb obliging as to gather and bunch 'em for us."

They rode on at a swinging lope and began climbing the dune, just as a heavy blast of wind, rearing in from the east, blotted out the cattle, blowing so hard that Kirby's group pulled up to wait until its fury had spent itself.

As the blinding clouds began to subside, there came the crash of a rifle, and then others, muffled by wind and slithering sand. Another hard gust of wind brought a curtain of sand sweeping over them, but not too soon to show four riders high up on a ridge to the side, on an enormous dune shaped like a whale's back.

Old Man Bowers' horse had been hit and went down, his legs collapsing under him, his neck outstretched, digging his muzzle deep in the sand. Bowers tried to jump off, but he was too late. One leg was held down by the weight of the horse.

He waved his hand. "I'll be all right,"

he yelled. "Go git 'em!"

Recklessly the five spurred up the ridge, while sand swirled about them, cloaking horses and riders.

THE WIND, gathering itself for a fresh effort, slackened a little as the group spurred toward the four riders on the slope above. Before the reckless charge the four turned tail, angling along a bench of the whale-back dune with Kirby and his men spurring hard in pursuit.

They had gone only a few hundred yards when from behind them came the reports of half a dozen rifles. Kirby looked over his shoulder and saw instantly that they were in a trap.

Some seven riders were halfway up the big dune and following Kirby's five. As these appeared, the quartet Kirby's outfit had been pursuing threw themselves from their saddles, and using their horses for barriers, opened fire. Which meant that Kirby and the others were caught between two forces. They would be cut to pieces between two sets of guns.

It was at this critical moment that Poke Battles, with Joe and Pete trailing in the rear unseen by the rustlers, did something that put the whole Kirby group everlastingly in their debt. All his life Poke had been a wandering ne'er-do-well, but like many men of his type, he was a crack hunter. His two boys, as he had bragged, he had taught to handle firearms from the time they had been able to hold a light rifle. All three had old rifles, but good ones. The Battles trio now opened fire on the large group of rustlers.

The effect of these shots on this second group was immediate, throwing them into a sudden panic. They had been dismounting to use their rifles from behind their horses, as their companions had done, when the shots from the Battles' rifles sounded. After two of the seven had been hit, the whole party let loose of the horses and hastily flopped flat on the surface of the dune to make themselves small targets.

Kirby, snatching quickly at the advantage given him when these rustlers were set afoot, swung his men at once into a curtain of sand rolling across the dune. Using it as screen, once more they rode on toward the first group, the four that had dismounted to open fire over their saddles.

When the flying sand thinned again, Kirby, Blue Lake, Peebles and the Wilsons were not a hundred yards away and coming at the quartet from the side. The riders had reloaded their rifles and now, firing fast as they spurred forward, they dropped on the dismounted four like a striking thunderbolt.

Two men went down before this unexpected savage onslaught. The other pair lacked the stomach to fight it out at close quarters. They flung themselves on their horses and, hugging the animals' necks, spurred hard toward the nearest sand cloud, to vanish in it.

Kirby, with a swing of his arm, directed his little force back toward the second group, leaving the two men lying on the sand. The party of seven rustlers, still lying prone, had turned to fire at Poke Battles and his sons who were lying behind the back of a fluted rib of a sandy drift.

As they rode, Kirby's party split into two forces—Jim Peebles and Blue Lake swinging to the left, while Kirby and the Wilsons bore to the right. When both sets of riders joined the Battles in firing on the men lying on the sand, the prone men were half circled by a ring of rifles.

Old Man Bowers, extricating himself from his horse, also got his rifle into action, and all this was too much for the rustlers. Led by a big, yellow-mustached fellow, the seven, including the two wounded men, scrambled to their feet, and, diving into a passing sand cloud, raced down the slope after the horses which they had turned loose a few seconds before.

One man, limping on one leg, was struck in the same leg by one of the rifles peppering them, somersaulted

down the steep slope of the dune directly in the path of the yellow-mustached man. The big fellow tried to hurdle him, but he also went down. The others, aided by a smothering sweep of sand, managed to corner their horses against a high drift. Vaulting into the saddles, the five spurred off. The two men left behind held up their hands and yelled that they quit.

LEAVING Old Man Bowers to handle them, Kirby, the Wilsons, Blue Lake and Jim Peebles rode in hot pursuit of the others, but the curtains of sand were too great a handicap. When Kirby saw both sets of men united and riding hell-bent for election toward the open country to the north, he called off pursuit. The rustlers evidently were too glad to escape with whole skins to give further trouble.

Blue Lake and the Wilsons rode over to the pair that had been knocked down behind their horses, while Kirby and Jim Peebles went to help Old Man Bowers, who was hazing the two prisoners down into the canyon bottom, forcing the yellow-mustached one to carry his wounded companion.

Poke and his two boys appeared with their horses, and a few minutes later they had all gathered in the bottom of the canyon under the big whale-back dune. They had been lucky—"in spite of having charged like blind fools into the buzzards," as Blue Lake had put it. Two rustlers were dead and they had two prisoners.

Kirby looked at the pair of prisoners. He suddenly identified one as the cowboy with whom Lon Teft had talked in the Crescent Saloon, just before Lon's shooting ruckus with Scriven.

"I don't see your friend up here," he said, "Lon Teft. He's your boss, I take it?"

The yellow-mustached man was silent, but the wounded man snarled, "Keep on asking questions. You might find something out. Go ahead."

"I'd like to shoot 'em both," declared Blue. "They'll be a lot of trouble if we take 'em along and just two more to fight later if we turn 'em loose."

"We'll take 'em along," decided Kirby.

"The rest of them cow-thiefs, I bet, will be trailing us, watching for a chance to bushwhack us," said Blue.

"Let 'em trail us," said Kirby. "They'll see a cow drive so fast it'll open even rustlers' eyes."

They changed their saddles to horses picked from the rustler remuda. Then they buried the men without ceremony, and in half an hour they had the herd of cattle on the move.

The moon came up to reveal the barren miles of wasteland and the line of cattle snaking over it. When they reached a little swale with coarse grass ofering some grazing, they camped. At the first gray in the sky they were moving out again, driving the cattle past some shallow lakes where there was fresh water.

Toward sunset of that day, they saw a group of riders coming toward them. Kirby rode ahead as scout. The rest prepared to meet a possible attack.

Kirby, however, soon came loping back with the party—Starr Camlin and seven men he had recruited from the mining camps. Kirby's group looked the new arrivals over carefully when they made camp. They were satisfied. The newcomers were tried range hands, all older men who had gotten disgusted with the vain search for gold and were tickled to be back with cattle, even if those cattle meant fighting.

They were on the march again at the first streak of dawn. The cattle had gaunted down visibly since the beginning of the drive, and their fast walk had slowed to a weary shuffle.

In the late morning the herders swung sharply to angle toward the walled valley, heading across a low ridge that offered a short cut. Kirby and Blue Lake rode on ahead for a look-see. To their amazement, they found that the cattle Kirby and his crew had brought into the Yellowrock country still grazed peacefully in the valley with only two

men on guard at Kirby's old camp. The men raced away without a shot.

They arrived in the afternoon, just as one of the cold seasonal rains which had been drenching the Yellowrock region began to fall. Despite the rain, the whole crew set to work, rebuilding the fence in the lower end of the valley at the head of the neck-like canyon, replacing the brush and rock structure with one completely of stone, a wall four feet high. They were still at work when darkness fell, bringing a messenger from Yellowrock—one of Jack Spratt's butchers, a former cowboy.

Jack Spratt had sent out three batches of news. The first was that there had been a tremendous uproar when the rustlers had brought news of the raid to Yellowrock. Lon Teft, Dan Shaw and Sheriff Dawes had ben too busy to try to stop the oncoming herd of cattle. What had busied them was consulting with Heyden and Gormack, with the result that Liam Heyden and Bill Gormack had thrown in with Shaw, Teft and Dawes.

The second batch of news stemmed from the first. An army of men was being raised in the town—riffraff from saloons, gamblers out of funds, unemployed miners. There would be sixty men or more. Lon Teft, who had undoubtedly been head of the rustler outfit, was acting as general of the army. They were gathering in Yellowrock to march out the next day for a mass attack on the valley.

The last bit of news which was important to Kirby was that Gail Camlin had returned to Yellowrock. She and Ma Battles had slipped into town and were staying with friends of Jack Spratt's, the McAllisters. McAllister was superintendent of one of the largest Yellowrock mines. Gail would be safe there as long as she stayed hidden.

"Of course," said Bowers cannily, "if you want to make sure of it, you could ride into town tonight to see for yourself."

But Kirby was already on his way.

XIV

KIRBY GRANT left his horse at the bottom of a high tailing dump under a big stump mill. He easily found the McAllister home, climbed the porch and knocked. Almost immediately Jack Spratt opened the door to admit him and beyond the hall Kirby saw Ma Battles and Gail in the parlor with the McAllisters.

"This would make a good courtin' parlor," joked Jack Spratt, after introducing Kirby to the owners. "Safest place I could find for Gail and Ma," he went on. "Those wolves won't stop at nothing and I even think they might arrest Gail."

"They won't put any girl before Miners' Court," said McAllister, "but it's safer for her to keep out of sight just the same."

"I intend to stay hidden," said Gail. Her eyes were fixed on Kirby. "You came back, you're all right. You all came back—safe," she said, as if she could not believe it.

"We were lucky," said Kirby. "The wind and sand played some tricks to help us against those rustlers. And what luck did you have? You saw the governor?"

She nodded. "Yes, but we didn't get much encouragement. He seemed to know almost as much as we did about what has been going on in Yellowrock, but he says the miners here want to run their own affairs their own way, and there's so many of them he'd had to let them do it or else call out the militia. He said that if Yellowrock wants to quit the Miners' Court, let them pull down their lynch gallows. But he's not going to send in state troops unless he has to."

"He might try an honest sheriff," said Kirby dryly.

"He said he was investigating Dawes, that he has a man keeping him informed of the situation here. But it was the almost like talking to a stone wall."

"He shook hands with us," added Ma Battles proudly. "A real live governor."

"All politicians are good at shaking hands," said Kirby. "Did you tell him about the meat shortage?"

"Yes, and all he said was maybe that would help bring the miners to their senses, to be hungry for meat might be a good thing for them."

"They're grumbling now at the high prices," said Spratt. "Pork and mutton in camp are all sold out. Some freight wagons bringing in pork got stuck crossing the pass. All the cattle that can be brought here for the next two months you've got out in the walled valley. Heyden and Gormack have put the price at a dollar a pound, and you take what you get."

"Whew!" exclaimed Kirby. "If we're blockaded out there for very long we'll slip out pack loads of meat at night to peddle around, selling carcasses by the quarter at way less than Heyden-Gormack prices. If we could only get these miners to realize that we'll feed them this winter at fair prices!"

Mr. Spratt spoke up. "I had an idea—to get a lot of bills printed, pointing out what meat cost when Spratt's market was running and what Heyden and Gormack are charging now. And guaranteeing to supply them all winter with meat at the prices the Spratt Market charged if we're allowed to sell the cattle you got back from the rustlers. The newspaper here is doing the print job secretly. The bills will be ready tomorrow for distribution."

"How about Marshal Grudd?" asked Kirby.

"He's just disappeared. No one seems to know where he went. Night marshal has taken over his job, but Dawes is running the town."

Kirby shrugged. "Then it looks as if it's up to us to hang on and battle it out in the walled valley."

"But this is a big army they're raising," said Gail.

"They'll need a big one. We've got a fighting bunch of men out there—not barroom gladiators. Only we need cartridges."

"Lon Teft bought all that the Yellowrock stores carry," said Spratt, "but one of my butchers went out and loaded a horse at the camps around. We cached them in the slaughterhouse under a pile of hides and left the horse and pack saddle out there."

Kirby nodded. "We'll need all the cartridges we can get. I'll pick up those cartridges on the way. I'll have to go back now. We're busy getting ready to meet this army."

GAIL WENT with him to the dark porch. A little drizzle of rain was falling again. "I've got my courage back, Kirby," she murmured as she clung to him. "They've got to lose. Any men as wicked as that bunch have to lose in the end."

"That's the way to talk," he approved. "But you stay close to this house," he ordered sternly. "Don't let any of that wolf pack find out you're here."

He got his horse, stopping on the way for the ammunition at the Spratt slaughter house and loading it on the pack horse Spratt had left in a corral. Without trouble he got back to the valley where he found the men, despite the darkness, still at work on the barricade at the head of the narrow canyon entrance.

After raising the wall, they had thrown up two high octagonal towers. These were protection against enemy rifles that might be fired from the rims and they would also give height to shoot at men using boulders for cover. In addition they had blockaded the trail up the walls with a stone barrier that commanded a portion of the path which was so narrow only one man or horse could come down at a time.

Morning came and found Kirby, Blue Lake and half a dozen others down-canyon watching the approach of the army which Lon Teft and Sheriff Dawes had raised. The force arrived in the early morning, traveling in wagons and lighter vehicles, a few men on horseback. As the column of men entered the canyon, Kirby and the others retreated.

Confidently the force led by Lon Teft and Sheriff Dawes traveled up the canyon to halt some few hundred yards below the entrance to the valley. Three men rode on up the canyon and halted as they came in sight of the barricading stone wall with its two defense towers.

The three riders were Lon Teft, Sheriff Dawes and a butcher from the Heyden-Gormack market. Leaving the other two, Dawes came riding on, closely eying the defense wall and its towers. When Dawes was some sixty yards away, Kirby called out, "All right—walk the rest of the way, Dawes!"

"Sheriff Dawes," corrected that official, furious at being ordered to proceed on foot.

"Not in this county you're not!" returned Kirby. "You're outside your territory and just another cow thief to us. Git down outa that saddle."

Raging, Dawes came on afoot, leading his horse. He stopped a few feet from the stone barricade.

"You've got stolen cattle in there," he accused them. "Dan Shaw, as head of the Prieto ranchers' organization, has sworn out warrants against all of you. No county line is going to stop me from serving 'em."

"Yeah, but how about some rifles stopping you?" inquired Kirby, dangling his legs from the top of the wall. "Turn loose your wolves, Dawes."

"We'll starve you out of there if we have to," growled the sheriff. "But we won't have to. We'll bring so many men in here you won't have a chance."

"The more there are of you, the more will get hurt," returned Kirby indifferently. "Better think about that. You'll be responsible for what happens. You've got no warrants that's any good in this county. You're no more a law officer here than I am."

Dawes turned to go, but flung one last threat. "I'm telling you, we'll smash you!"

THE Teft-Dawes army finally prepared to move into battle, with some thirty-five men carrying their rifles and marching raggedly up-canyon. When they were within easy shooting range of the defense wall, they dropped to take cover behind the boulders scattered along the bank of the river.

Then starting a crawling advance. They all opened fire, the booming of their guns filling the narrow canyon, making a heavy thunder within the precipitous walls. Outside of the deafening racket, the firing was harmless, for the slugs whirred over the wall or spattered into it, to ricochet off.

The attackers might as well have been hitting on the wall with toy hammers. Realizing this, some of the bolder men crawled up the stream under cover of a heavy fire from their companions.

Not a shot as yet had been sent in return, but suddenly half a dozen of the defenders opened fire from the top of the towers, which were high enough to angle down shots over the stream banks. These bullets were enough to send the men scuttling back.

One thing Kirby had noted—Lon Teft was not among those who had come up-canyon to attack, nor were at least twenty men of the Yellowrock army. Teft was tricky and cunning. Kirby Grant figured Lon was cooking up a little surprise for him and the others in the canyon.

Suddenly a burst of shots at the upper end of the valley where a narrow trail angled down sounded, mounting swiftly to a crashing thunder. The men at the wall held their ground; they knew the attackers couldn't go far down that trail. The Wilsons were behind the rock wall commanding a narrow stretch of trail and no one would get past them.

This new action and the attack from down-canyon had all the appearance of affairs meant to divert the attention of the valley defenders. Kirby's forces lacked the numbers to keep guards on the rims, but they did have two men riding patrol along the walls watching the most likely places of descent.

The agreed signal sounded now from one of Kirby's patrol riders on the east wall—two closely-spaced shots followed by two more. Kirby and five men prompt-

ly mounted horses tied back out of bullet range, and raced up the valley. The guard was firing fast near a huge V-shaped cleft in the high cliff. Kirby's group realized that a party of men had slid down a rope from the rim to a ledge halfway down the wall. From the ledge they were using another rope to drop to the valley floor.

A few men had already reached the valley bottom and Kirby, catching flashes of silver on the garb of one man, guessed the owner to be the gaudily attired Lon Teft. These few men, taking cover under the cliff wall, were trying to drive

away the single patrol rider so that the rest of the group on the ledge above could descend the dangling rope.

Kirby and his five dismounted, and lying prone behind rocks, hailed shots at the half a dozen men under the cliff. In the valley below, the guns had started up again in another furious attack. Ignoring that, Kirby's party began a hasty advance, firing as they worked their way along, using fallen fragments of cliff as cover.

As the firing became hotter, Kirby heard Lon Teft encouraging the men with him to stand their ground. He had courage, Lon.

Kirby had Blue Lake, Jim Peebles, Old Man Bowers, Starr Camlin and a miner-cowboy in his bunch. He, Lake, Peebles and Bowers knew this valley better than the intruders, and they used that knowledge now.

Peebles and Bowers managed to get to a small ditch and crawled along it to pour in shots from the side. But Teft had a tough crew with him. They were putting up a good fight and a smart one, keeping themselves well hidden under an overhang of the cliff. Kirby, noticing the overhang, had a sudden idea.

"Ricochet your shots back from the wall!" he yelled. "Bounce 'em down on the buzzards."

BLUE LAKE and the others got the idea at once and fired at the rooflike overhang. Startled yells sounded from Teft's group as misshapen chunks of metal hammered back from the curving cliff, striking among the invaders with a terrifying capacity for doing damage. Three of the men, unwilling to take a chance at being hit, emerged to charge desperately toward the ditch which Peebles and Old Man Bowers occupied. In the lead was Lon Teft. Hit, he took two staggering steps back before going down on his face. The others fled back to the cliff wall.

"Throw away that gun!" Old Man Bowers yelled at Lon, who was trying to raise his rifle.

Teft lifted his head, laughed. "Can't you see I'm knocked out?" he called. "Don't you trust me?"

"No more'n a snake," Old Man Bowers returned sternly, just as two men emerged from the brush to the left of the boulder which Kirby was using for cover. Kirby rose a little to meet them, got one and swung his rifle around swiftly on the man in the lead, the big rawboned deputy who had been his jailer in Yellowrock jail. Kirby's hammer snapped on an exploded cartridge; snapped again.

The big deputy fired at Kirby as he ran toward him. "I got you, Grant!" he shouted. "You got away from me once. Try to git away this time." Then, angered by his misses, he stopped to aim deliberately.

At the side, thirty feet from the dep-

uty, Lon Teft managed to raise his rifle. "Whoa up. That's Kirby Grant. His folks raised me!" he called and fired. The deputy fell to the ground on his side, lay still. The other men at the foot of the cliff had seen enough. They shouted that they quit.

The backbone of the attack had been broken. Shots sent at the ledge on which the remainder of Lon's party perched threw them into a panic. They could not climb up, so they quit too. One by one they threw down their guns and slid down the rope to line up along the cliff, hands held high. At the lower end of the valley the guns were also stopping.

Kirby Grant came over to Lon, who was lying on his back, face up, still clutching the rifle. Lon Teft looked up at him from glazing eyes.

"I owed you a debt, Kirby," he said. "I paid it. That big ape would of blasted you down."

"You're right, Lon," he admitted.

"You and Gail name your first boy after me," Lon went on, forcing a grin. "Don't worry about me. I been headed for an end like this ever since I was born."

His jaws clenched as he fought to keep from groaning with the pain that racked him. "Say adios for me to your dad and mom. They treated me mighty nice as a boy." His eyes dully studied the sky. "I'm wishing you luck, Kirby. Played you a dirty trick. A lot of 'em. But I had to fight you—you was too hot after our cattle—the cattle we worked hard to steal and bring over here."

"You headed that rustler gang?" asked Kirby.

"Yeah. I was the ringtailed ramrod. We slipped the cattle out of the Prieto country, picked up a few more on the trail and got half of Old Man Bowers' herd. And almost got yours and Gail Camlin's that night. If it hadn't been for Heyden and Gormack blocking us with their crooked brand inspection here, we'd've got rich. I only wish Heyden and Gormack was out here. But they made us do the dirty work for 'em, and then if we'd licked you, they'd of squeezed us out. Those two hold all the cards in the deck. You got no chance against 'em. Hightail it out of here while you're still alive. Me, I'm done for."

"We'll get a doctor for you," offered Kirby.

"No good. All I need is a little piece of ground just six by three."

All the guns in the valley had fallen silent. The men below the defense wall moved back hastily, as if fearing an attack on them. A little later they were in full retreat for Yellowrock.

After the main army had gone, the prisoners taken on the cliff were released and allowed to head dejectedly for Yellowrock, minus their rifles and six-shooters. With them they carried the body of the rawboned deputy.

Lon Teft was carried on a makeshift stretcher to camp. Nothing could be done for him. He died a few minutes later. There was no figuring out Lon, thought Kirby sadly. He'd been a strange boy, capable both of generosity and treachery. Kirby's folks would be glad to hear that the boy they had raised had saved their son's life.

Old Man Bowers and Poke Battles went down-canyon to make sure that none of the Yellowrock army was still lurking in the vicinity, while Poke Battles' two boys, still keeping guard on the rustler prisoners, prepared a big supper.

The defenders were jubilant. They had their cattle and none of the men had been seriously hurt for all of the shots fired. If they could lick this army, they could lick any bunch Heyden and Gormack with their partners could send in

XV

EARLY that morning from the McAllister house Gail had seen Sheriff Dawes's and Lon Teft's army leave Yellowrock. The numbers represented overwhelming odds against Kirby Grant's little crew, and she was not reassured even though Jack Spratt told her that the odds were not as big as they seemed.

"Half of these men Lon Teft raised

ain't fighters," declared the butcher. "They'll be fighting only for wages, and no man risks his life too much just for wages. Some will run at the first close shot. The rest will be so whisky-soaked they couldn't hit the side of a mountain."

Waiting in the house that afternoon had been a heartbreaking affair. It was almost dark when Jack Spratt returned to the McAllister house to report to Gail and Ma Battles. Sheriff Dawes had brought back the army which had met complete defeat.

"Dawes took one bunch against the defense wall at the end of the valley and couldn't do a thing," said Spratt jubilantly. "Lon Teft tried to get in another bunch by sliding down ropes, but his outfit had to surrender. They say Lon was killed or at least badly hurt. The deputy that was jail guard when you broke out Kirby was killed. I'll go back and see what else I can learn."

Two hours passed and Spratt did not return. Mr. McAllister came in finally to report that after the battle two of the defenders, who had been unwary enough to ride out on a scout, had been taken prisoner by a group of Dawes's men lingering in the vicinity. They had been roped from ambush and captured unhurt, brought into town and thrown into jail. One was Old Man Bowers—the other, said McAllister with a regretful look at Ma Battles, was her husband Poke. In addition, Jack Spratt had been arrested by Dawes and thrown into jail with Bowers and Poke.

The news cast a heavy gloom on the house. Ma began to weep uncontrollably and Gail's eyes filled with tears. Poke Battles had been with her almost all of the cattle drive to Yellowrock and had fought to defend her herd as if it was his own. Likewise Old Man Bowers had risked his life helping her, and Jack Spratt, even after the loss of his market, had risked staying in Yellowrock to help Kirby Grant and Gail.

She thought instantly of a rescue, but knew it was impossible. The jail itself would no doubt be guarded with a ring of rifles. The sheriff would figure that Kirby's bunch might be just reckless enough to ride into Yellowrock to get these friends out of jail. Heyden and Gormack had all the cards in their hands again. Their army having failed in a direct attack, they were resorting to another sort of fighting.

As they sat in the McAllister parlor, there came a peremptory knocking. Mrs. McAllister came back pale-faced from the door. "It's Heyden and Gormack," she whispered, "asking for you, Gail. You'd better see them."

So they had discovered that she was hiding here. She went to the door and boldly flung it open.

"We've come for another little talk," said Heyden, removing his hat.

"We judge that you'll be able to get word to Kirby Grant," went on Heyden. "You're free to take it out yourself. Tell him that there will be a meeting of the—can you guess what?"

"Another meeting of the Miners' Court, is that it?" asked Gail.

"Exactly," said Heyden softly. "This time to try three men who are guilty of killing Deputy Sheriff Wolf and of shooting several other men. Besides being notorious rustlers who are responsible for the high prices of meat in Yellowrock."

There was of course no use to point out the obvious—that Heyden and Gormack had raised meat to its present high price.

"The meeting will be tomorrow morning," Heyden went on, "at about ten. We want those cattle in the walled valley and we intend to have them. You're licked, and you better admit it. We don't think you'll let these three men be hanged. And you'll remember the signal for Miners' Court," he concluded. "Two blasts, and then after thirty seconds two more blasts, and so on."

AFTER they left, Gail realized she was helpless. Heyden and Gormack had turned defeat into victory. She knew that Kirby Grant and the men with him, rather than tamely surrender the cattle, would come to town to try to rescue

their friends. Here in Yellowrock where the authority of Sheriff Dawes was unquestioned, any such attack was an assault against the law. Besides, the sheriff would have fifty gunmen inside the jail and scattered about it, waiting to slaughter Kirby Grant and his men.

McAllister got a saddled horse for her and she rode out to the walled valley, taking the route she had traveled many times to and from Yellowrock. The snow had stopped, leaving a shallow crunchy blanket of white. Clearing skies brought a sharp cold.

There was a guard stationed in the canyon, one of the cowboy-miners Starr Camlin had recruited to help Kirby. He passed her on to the defense wall where she left her horse to go to the other camp. She found Kirby there, with Blue Lake and her uncle Starr and all the others except the men on guard.

She dismounted, drank coffee and told them what had occurred in Yellowrock. "What they hope to do, of course," she said, "is to draw you into town to try to free Spratt and Poke and Bowers. They'll have fifty riflemen waiting for you."

Their faces revealed nothing, but she knew that they would ride into Yellowrock even if there were ten times fifty riflemen waiting. Gail realized there was no way to argue them out of that wild scheme, and she didn't try.

"Why not let them hold this Miners' Court?" she asked. "Mr. McAllister and I will do what we can for Poke and the other two. We already have handbills printed showing the prices Jack Spratt charged for meat, and promising that these same prices will be charged all winter if Heyden and Gormack don't have a meat monopoly."

They considered it. Then Kirby Grant nodded. "We'll be there at Miners' Court too."

"They'll have their gunmen on guard."

"Yes," he agreed, "but they can't keep us from talking. And miners aren't the fools Heyden and Gormack think. We'll give 'em our side of the case. Then if we can't do anything else, we'll try guns to save those three from hanging. If there's to be a fight, we'd rather have it out in the open."

KIRBY rode back with Gail to Yellowrock, their horses' hoofs crunching through the surface of the freezing snow. It was a silent ride. There was nothing to say, with the weight of the morrow on them, even when he put his arm about her to kiss her before he left her on the edge of town. It wasn't safe for him to ride in. Rifles were waiting there to blast him down at sight.

She left her horse at the livery stable and headed for the McAllister house. Passing near the Bonanza Palace Hotel, she had a sudden notion. Dan Shaw was the one man who could tell the full truth at Miners' Court and be believed. He knew the inside story.

Acting on her hunch, she slipped through the dark dining room of the hotel and climbed the service stairs to the suite occupied by Dan Shaw and his daughter.

When she rapped on the door, Dan Shaw opened it. She was shocked at the change in the rancher. He looked twenty years older. His broadcloth suit was wrinkled as if he had slept in it. The room was in disorder.

"What's the matter, Mr. Shaw?" she asked.

"Peggy," he said dully. "Gone. Run off with a no-'count gambler to the mine camps up north. Left on the stage with him. And I haven't even got money to follow 'em. I got no horse and I owe for this room. And Peggy, she—she's all I got in the world."

Gail felt sympathy for Shaw at the moment, but she did not forget it was through his treachery that Kirby and the rest had met disaster.

"I deserve it all," he groaned, "branding Kirby as a rustler and throwing in with those thieves."

"You know there's to be a Miners' Court to try Battles and Spratt and Bowers for what they did to protect that herd of Prieto cattle? You could tell the truth at the meeting and make up for what

you've done. And you'd still have your cattle," she argued. "They'd give you money to follow Peggy and take her back home. You've still got your ranch there. You can make up for what you've done to Kirby and the others by telling the miners Old Man Bowers and Poke and Spratt and the others aren't thieves."

He considered that. "Peggy likely wouldn't go home with me if I found her. I wouldn't dare go back to face my neighbors after what I've done."

He lifted his head suddenly. "Heyden and Gormack will cheat me out of the share they promised me in those cattle. I've got no chance against 'em. They just been stringing me along. I been crazy—crazy to turn against Kirby and my neighbors."

He was silent for a few moments. "I'll do it," he said finally. "I'll tell the whole rotten deal. You can count on me."

Gail was not wholly convinced. "We've counted on you before, Mr. Shaw. Are you sure that this time—"

"You can count on me," he repeated. "I'll be at Miners' Court."

He put his hands to his face and began crying like a small boy. He had been drinking, Gail realized. An empty bottle of whisky stood on the dresser. He might be over his repentant mood by morning, but feeling a little more hopeful, she went to the McAllister house and to a night that held little sleep for her and Ma Battles, who occupied the same room.

"Poor Poke," repeated Ma every few minutes. "Never was a man better to his family. Why, Poke he promised to buy me a solid silver bathtub to take the place of that wooden one them dang rustlers wrecked, soon's he found a gold mine. . . ."

Morning dawned on a world lightly covered with snow glistening under a sun which rose clear of clouds. Gail took it as a good omen until Mr. McAllister, who had gone downtown, returned after she and Ma had eaten breakfast.

"Dan Shaw was just found shot in his hotel room. "Killed himself during the night."

Gail paled. Now that slim hope was gone. Shaw, lacking courage to go through with his promise, to admit publicly that he was a scoundrel, had taken the coward's way out.

The minutes began to fly fast. Ma Battles went downtown to try to see Poke, but was refused admission. She had returned, her big face tear-streaked, when it came suddenly—the twin blasts, half a minute, and then another pair of explosions.

THE SOUND of the paired blasts continued to come in thirty-second intervals. Groups of miners gathered to drift toward Gallows Hill. The street to the hill passed not far from the McAllister House. Ma Battles and Gail went out to intercept the miners, giving out the handbills to the men as they passed. McAllister had several men passing them out downtown.

On the handbills were statements showing the price of meats when Jack Spratt had operated compared with the dollar-a-pound now asked by Heyden and Gormack's market. There was also Jack Spratt's promise that his prices would stand for the winter if he were allowed to slaughter the cattle held in the walled valley.

Men were glancing over the leaflets as they climbed toward Gallows Hill. Reading matter was scarce in Yellowrock.

The prisoners appeared, marching along under the guard of Sheriff Dawes and a dozen heavily armed deputies.

Ma was allowed to march beside her husband and Gail fell in with Spratt and Bowers. At the upper end of the amphitheater, almost under the shadow of the gallows, were a few rough benches of plank still covered with snow. The prisoners were seated on these, with Ma and Gail beside them.

Below them gathered the crowd which was to be the jury—all of the men in town who cared to attend the meeting, in the main miners with a fair sprinkling of gamblers, saloonmen and idlers.

There was no sign of Kirby and his cowboys. The court officers assembled—

the man who was to act as judge, the prosecutor and a pot-bellied, bleary-eyed fellow who had been appointed to defend the prisoners. This man, who was plainly drunk, boasted that he had studied law for a year and assured the prisoners that they were as good as free men.

"Hang the rustlers!" shouted a bearded miner in the front row of spectators, and the yell was taken up by a dozen others in his vicinity. Gail discovered the bulky Bill Gormack among the shouting men and guessed that he had ordered the yell. Heyden was sitting apart, content evidently to be on the side lines, while his partner ran the show.

The blasts continued as summons, bringing more miners in red shirts, gamblers in black garb and flowered vest. Some stood, others squatted or found seats by brushing snow off boulders.

The judge finally called for quiet, and the prosecuting attorney arose and stood on the little stone platform to outline the case against the trio. This man proved to be a spellbinder, an experienced speaker and well coached by Heyden, Gail guessed.

"Sure the price of meat is high!" he began, holding up one of the leaflets distributed by Gail and Ma Battles. "And why is that? Because these three thieving prisoners and their fellow rustlers have made cattlemen afraid to drive cattle to Yellowrock. Too many herds bound for Yellowrock have been stolen. And when Sheriff Dawes and his brave deputies rode out yesterday to take over a big herd of stolen cattle, what happened? They were shot at and some of them killed. These three men belong to a band that right now is holding enough stolen cattle to supply Yellowrock with cheap beef for the rest of the winter."

He went on, pouring out a series of wild accusations. From that he went to blackening the three prisoners' characters. Old Man Bowers, according to the speaker, was not a cattle buyer who had been robbed of his cattle, but a lifelong rustler. Poke Battles had spent most of life in prison.

Hearing this, Ma Battles got indignantly to her feet. "You're a liar!" she accused the speaker. "If Poke ever served one day in jail, I'm a dancehall girl.

When the prosecutor had finally run out of breath and lies, it was only natural that the defense attorney should state his case. Instead, the pot-bellied representative of the prisoners only waved his hand.

"I'll talk later," he mumbled, and the prosecutor called his witnesses.

XVI

FIRST witness was Sheriff Dawes. He backed up what the lawyer had said—that the three prisoners had resisted his deputies in the walled valley, killing several and wounding many others. He identified the three prisoners one by one as leaders in the battle.

The bleary-eyed defense lawyer could have proved by dozens of witnesses that Jack Spratt at least had been in Yellowrock during the battle, but he only grinned foolishly when it was his turn to cross-examine the witness and waved Dawes aside. Another witness was called.

Gail's indignation could stand no more. She sprang up. "I want to ask you a few questions, Dawes," she stated.

"Make her shut up!" yelled Gormack from the crowd. "This is no place for a woman! We don't listen to no girl. She's in with the rustler bunch—"

But other men were calling out, "Let her speak!" The next instant the whole crowd had taken it up and were roaring a demand that the girl be heard.

The tumult quieted as she took the rock platform. Her voice sounded, trembling a little at first with anger. "Instead of these three men being on trial," she declared, "it should be Sheriff Dawes, Liam Heyden and his partner Gormack."

At this the men surrounding Gormack raised another tumult and again they were drowned out by a roared demand that the girl be permitted to have her say.

Hatless, her blonde hair gleaming in the sun and her face flushed, she made an appealing figure. Her voice lost its

trembling and suddenly rang out clearly, easily carrying over the crowd.

"I know about meat in Yellowrock," she declared. "I drove a herd of cattle here and Heyden and Gormack sent their grafting brand inspectors out to steal them. If not for Poke Battles and Mr. Bowers, they'd have stolen every head. Then Mr. Spratt and I went into partnership in his market to sell my cattle as beef. You will remember that we sold beef at fair prices—good meat—until Heyden and Gormack forced us out of business by having my uncle brought up before Miners' Court on a fake charge of killing a man—a man who had died of pneumonia.

"We'd sell meat here again all winter at those same fair prices, if not for Heyden and Gormack. Meat from cattle with an honest title, not stolen cattle. If we're not allowed to do that, what will you have to pay? A dollar a pound now, and more later—"

"She's right," someone interrupted. "Heyden and Gormack are robbers, the ones really guilty!"

Gail had the crowd with her now, laughing, cheering her on. Bill Gormack, realizing that the court meeting was going against him and Heyden, stood up, his big brutal face red with anger. "I've heard enough!" he bellowed. "I'm stopping this."

He advanced toward Gail, shoving men aside with his big body. But he never reached the girl. A man suddenly appeared beside her—the wide-shouldered Marshal Henry Grudd, who had disappeared mysteriously from Yellowrock a few days before.

The crowd, which had been in an uproar, quieted now. The marshal's voice came calmly, but loud enough to reach every ear. "Everything this girl says and is going to say is true," he stated. "You're all going to listen to her. Sit down, Bill Gormack, or I'll kill you here and now."

Gormack hesitated, glaring at Grudd with eyes that were red with rage. Then several miners behind Gormack grabbed his coat tail and pulled him down.

IT WAS quiet when Grudd spoke again. "You're going to hear the truth. The trial of these men is going to be conducted fairly. Here are a few facts that I know are positively true. Yesterday Sheriff Dawes took out a bunch of hoodlums to seize a herd in another county where he had no authority. He started a war with the men authorized to hold those cattle. Two hundred head of those cattle belong to Bowers here, who is held a prisoner for having done nothing but defend his property. He only fought to defend his cattle, as you would fight to defend your mining claims."

Sheriff Dawes sprang to his feet. "Before he shot himself, Dan Shaw owned all those cattle. He gave Heyden and Gormack a bill of sale for them."

"So they could sell 'em for meat at a dollar a pound!" jeered some miner.

"Hang Heyden and Gormack!" came a raucous voice. "Hang the crooks! They'll have us paying a ounce of gold dust for a pound of beef before winter is over."

"All right," shouted Grudd, "let's hear Miss Camlin."

Gail went on. She told of Kirby Grant, Blue Lake, Jim Peebles and the Wilsons who, with the consent of the owners, had brought a herd of cattle to Yellowrock in the hope of finding other hundreds of cattle which previously had been stolen from the Prietos. Those stolen cattle had been found in the sand dunes to the north and had been taken from the rustlers along with a number of cattle belonging to Old Man Bowers. She told of the treachery of Dan Shaw who had confessed it to her and had promised to tell the truth in Miners' Court that morning, but had shot himself instead. These three prisoners were not thieves. They had been guilty only of fighting Heyden and Gormack.

"If you'll give them a chance," she concluded, "honest cattlemen like Bowers will provide you with plenty of beef. With the understanding that money from the sale of the cattle in the walled valley will be held in a bank here in Yellowrock until the owners of the cattle can prove

legally they're entitled to it. Turn these men loose and you'll have beef, all you want, and at fair prices.

When she had finished there was a thunder of cheers that smothered the hoots of the Heyden-Gormack followers who again began pushing to the front, shouting threats. But it was too late. The tide had already turned against them. There were stern yells for them to sit down. Heyden, who had remained in the background, came forward to try to talk from the platform, but he was shouted down.

With the excitement at its height, there came above the uproar another sort of sound—high-pitched, unmistakable cowboy yells.

The howling mob of men turned to stare up the slope. What they saw amazed them into silence. For riding down the slope in a long line came an even dozen horsemen, led by Kirby Grant, Blue Lake, Jim Peebles and the Wilsons, followed by Starr Camlin and six of the men he had recruited. Over their saddle horns the riders carried rifles, and behind him each rider led a pack horse loaded with two quarters of beef.

With the reckless ease of their hard-bitten kind, the line of horsemen rode on down the slope to pass by the gallows. Still in a long line they halted on the edge of the amphitheater, so close that the marbled red and white of the lean meat and tallow could be seen.

"Goddlemighty!" some awestruck miner yelled. "Lookit all that meat!"

Heyden said something to Dawes, and the sheriff sprang to the platform. "There's the rustlers!" he yelled. "Git 'em, you fellows. Shoot 'em out of their saddles."

Marshal Grudd shoved Dawes violently to the side. "Shut up!" he ordered. "What do you want, Kirby Grant?" he asked the rider in the lead.

Kirby raised his bandaged left arm. "Heard there was a little shortage of beef in Yellowrock," he called genially. "So we brought you some. If you'll dig some barbecue pits and furnish the wood, we'll furnish the beef. And we won't charge you a dollar a pound for it. We'll furnish it to you free."

A roar of laughter swept over Yellowrock Miners' Court and then a burst of approving yells.

Kirby lifted his arm again. "Of course we'll wait until you get through with your business here," he added. "But hurry up. This is mighty good beef. Honest beef—not stolen beef. I know because my dad back in the Prieto Mountains raised some of it. And if you don't believe me, when you're eating it see if you can find on it the brand of those great dollar-a-pound cattle raisers, Heyden and Gormack!"

Laughter came again and swelled to a roar. Miners slapped each other's backs; they whooped and hollered. A foghorn voice again yelled, "Hang Heyden and Gormack!"

Then some leather-lunged miner bellowed above all the racket, "I've heard enough to decide this case. Let's take a vote!"

A hundred voices took it up. "Vote!" they bellowed. "Line up and vote! Vote! Vote!"

SLOWLY, in the confusion, the men who had heard the trial of Battles, Spratt and Bowers began to separate, those who believed the three should be freed crossing to the right of the line marked out by a row of small stones; those to the left who were voting for conviction.

For a few moments the men were milling so confusedly that it was impossible to tell how the voting was going.

Gormack was the center of thirty or forty men, evidently his own picked crowd, who were all yelling loudly for conviction and urging other men to join them, even trying to shove the hesitant across the line. But the men pushed by the rowdies determinedly stepped across the line to the right and some who had already crossed to the left recrossed it to join the crowd on the right. Then there was a sudden surge, and almost as one mass, men flowed to the right of the line,

voting overwhelmingly for acquittal.

Gail's heart leaped, and then in sheer relief she began crying. Ma Battles rushed over to hug her, and there were tears streaming down Ma's face.

With the vote decided, some men below started to yell, "We want beef!" Then more and more took it up, until the whole mob was bellowing out the words in a chant.

Kirby Grant got off his horse to join Gail and the prisoners. The massive Ma Battles was now hugging her smaller husband, almost lifting him from his feet.

"The idea," Gail told Kirby severely, "trying to bribe a court by offering a free beef barbecue. Don't you know that's a serious crime?"

Kirby grinned. "I thought that meat would fetch 'em. Grudd came to our camp last night and we rigged this up. Grudd gave us the signal when to ride down here. I was close enough to hear part of your speech. If I ever get tried for murder, you've got to be my lawyer."

Then his face sobered. "But this isn't over yet. Just when you think you've got those two crooks licked, they show up with something new."

Dawes had left Liam Heyden, and again standing on the little platform, the sheriff raised his sharp voice above the hilarious uproar of the crowd by now examining the pack loads of beef.

"Hold on," he yelled. "This case is done in Miners' Court, but I'm holding these three men you turned loose to be tried in a regular law court for cattle stealing. Along with all these cowboys. And I've got the deputies to do the arresting."

Beside Dawes, Marshal Henry Grudd again appeared. "Just a minute, Dawes," he called. "I've got something more to say.

"Men," he went on, "I've got some news for you. I've kept hands off on these Miners' Court meetings. I hated to. Maybe at first when there was no regular courts here, there was some excuse for Miners' Court—and that." He gestured toward the gaunt frame of the gallows. "But there's no more excuse now. A judicial district has been set up for this Yellowrock region. Court will meet here regularly after this. And there's to be a bill put through the legislature forming a county here, with Yellowrock its county seat. Yellowrock will have a courthouse and a courtroom."

FOR A MOMENT it was uncertain how this would be taken. Miners Court had been a proud tradition in the camp. But having Yellowrock made a center of its own county meant a lot to their pride.

"But meanwhile I'm sheriff!" bawled Dawes. "And I'm arresting these men."

"As to that," said Grudd, "I got a letter here I brought from the governor. Been over visting him a few days. By law the governor has the right to suspend a sheriff, while an investigation is made of his actions. And he also has the right to appoint a temporary sheriff in the place of the regular one. Dawes, you're suspended. There's a new sheriff here."

"Who?" demanded Dawes.

Grudd tapped his broad chest. "Me!"

Again for a few moments the crowd silently digested this news. Grudd had been an able marshal in Yellowrock and they respected him. A yell of approval greeted this announcement.

"The new sheriff," Grudd said, waving them to silence, "is going to be for law and order. Real law and real order. As temporary sheriff, I'm issuing my first order now. And that's for the chopping down of the Yellowrock gallows. McAllister," he called, "bring your men!"

Half a dozen men, the most responsible ones in the community, mine superintendents and merchants, were led forward by McAllister. A long box was on the ground near the benches. From this the six took bright new axes and marched solemnly to the foot of the two high poles that upheld the crossbar of the gallows. Chips began to fly.

"Also," went on Grudd, "this will be the last session of Miners' Court. From

now on the law is here. If any of you don't like that, I'll deputize enough men to make you like it. And you six keep on chopping," he told McAllister and the other axmen. "This was just a little trick to get those axes in your hands. Keep on using 'em until you've got enough wood for all those barbecue pits."

A roar of laughter arose at this. The crowd was tickled by the idea of the merchants and mine superintendents laboring to spilt and chop up the heavy logs.

Other men went to get picks and shovels, to begin digging barbecue pits in the vacant lots above the main street. The cowboys took their pack horses down to unload the quarters of beef and the last meeting of Miners' Court broke up. Heyden and Gormack had disappeared.

"It's all over now," Gail said to Kirby thankfully.

"Except for one thing," said Kirby. "Grudd is arresting Heyden and Gormack to hold them for trial on murder charges. He has evidence to show that they had several cattlemen killed by shooting or hanging in order to get their cattle."

Jack Spratt was taking charge of the barbecue, with at least twenty men trying to tell him the proper way to barbecue beef. Kirby left Gail with Spratt and headed down the main street with Blue Lake and Jim Peebles.

THEY FOUND Grudd in the city jail. Merely nodding to the three, he led them to the Heyden-Gormack market. There he sent Lake and Peebles to the side while Grudd, with Kirby behind him, headed for the door opening from the street to the office of the two partners.

Liam Heyden was kneeling before the big safe in the corner, emptying it of its contents.

"Planning to leave town, are you, Liam?" Grudd asked. "Hate to spoil your plans, but you're under arrest."

"Why sure," said Heyden. "That's all right. We got nothing to fear."

Kirby Grant saw a partly opened door in the back wall, and as the door swung a little further on its hinges, he suddenly glimpsed a double-barreled shotgun turning toward Grudd. Grudd saw the gun also and whipped out the six-shooter in his left holster to fire at the holder of the shotgun—Bill Gormack.

At the same time, Liam Heyden's hand dived to a shoulder holster and Kirby Grant drew his six-shooter just as Grudd's roared out in several shots at the door. Kirby beat Heyden's draw by a hair. His slug sent Heyden twisting to the floor, blood seeping through his shattered right shoulder. And Bill Gormack, still clutching his unfired shotgun, fell into the room.

Blue Lake and Jim Peebles burst in through the door from the market.

"Don't shoot again!" called Heyden.

The curious crowd that had gathered outside the market drifted away, but word of the shooting had gone up to the barbecue pits. Gail Camlin and Jack Spratt came hurrying down the street. Kirby met them in front of the market.

"I think you better open up your butcher shop right away, Jack," he said. "We got a lot of cattle that need selling. That bill of sale you gave Heyden and Gormack is illegal, considering how you were forced to sign it."

Jack Spratt beamed. "I'll have to consult someone on opening my market," he said. "My partner."

"Partner?"

"Sure," said Spratt, nodding to Gail. "If not for her, I'd be back in San Francisco, cutting up meat for wages. We're still partners in the meat business."

"Hold on," protested Kirby. "Just a minute. I'm needing her more as my partner. I want her to help me drive beef cattle to Yellowrock."

Spratt laughed. "I thought there was something like that in the air. You don't deserve her, Kirby, but you're the nearest to it of any man I know. That girl, she gives a man courage."

"Courage!" exclaimed Kirby. "She gives me just the opposite. I'm plumb afraid to speak to her about this partnership with me."

Jack Spratt hurried away and Kirby walked up the street with Gail to meet Poke Battles just emerging from a hardware store. With the help of a clerk, Poke was lugging an enormous metal bathtub at least seven feet long.

"Present for Ma," explained Poke. "She'll have to wait till I find my gold mine for that silver one I promised her. Guess this one'll do in the meantime."

Laughing, Kirby and Gail went on, and Kirby borrowed a horse for Gail. Together they rode down to the river.

Gail looked at Kirby with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Then she laughed. Kirby suddenly echoed the laugh.

"Look here," he said, "you know what I want to say. I want to take you back home to show you off to my folks. Will you go there with me, Gail?"

"Yes, Kirby," she said directly. "I'll go with you. You know that."

He leaned from his saddle, drew her close for a long kiss.

"We'll leave the cattle here for Spratt to look after while we go back for more," he said after a few moments. "When we come back I've been thinking that the walled valley would make a good place for a ranch. There's enough grazing land there so we could build us a big ranch. By homesteading the entrance we could keep everybody else out."

"Wouldn't that be selfish of us?" joked Gail.

"Yes, it would," he admitted. "But you might as well get used to it—I'm going to be mighty selfish about us, Gail, all of my life."

The girl looked at the distant mountains with their snow-capped peaks gleaming in the sun. "Kirby," she said suddenly, "I hope that everyone who has to fight such an ornery bunch as we've fought, wins out."

"They'll win," said Kirby. "If they're in the right, and if they fight hard enough, they'll win out." ● ● ●

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp

IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.

VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

COWBOY CLEVE HAVENS had a lot of ideas

—until he met the gal with the iron will

who thought she could take care of herself

THE BIG

"A cowhand gets mighty lonesome for womenfolks," he said

LONESOME

By S. Omar Barker

TO CLEVE HAVENS, approaching at an easy lope, the girl on the wagon seat looked to be all sunbonnet and calico. He could see one foot braced up on the foreboard, handy to the brake. It should have been a small foot, and probably was, but the boot was a scuffed, flat-heeled, sodbuster's clodhopper. Cleve's shod horse made plenty of noise on the rocky hillside for the girl to have heard him even if her wagon had not been stopped, but she did turn her head. The cowboy surmised from the panting of her team of big bony grays that she had stopped to breathe them, not to await his approach.

The two young boys in chicken-ketcher saddles who were trailing some forty aimless-looking cattle and half a dozen burr-tailed ponies along behind the wagon, raised their right arms and hailed him, plainly trying to sound free and easy like cowboys in their greeting.

But the sunbonneted girl holding the line in her cotton-gloved hands did not turn her head, even at his, "Howdy, ma'am."

"Howdy," she said, in a distinct tone of hostility. "Whose range are we trespassing on now?"

"Why, nobody's, I reckon," said Cleve in surprise. "What made you think we was?"

"Why pretend you don't know?" she came back stiffly, still without looking his way.

"Because I don't," shrugged the cowboy with a friendly, puzzled smile that of course the girl did not see. "I always figgered this was a free country."

"So did Pa!" There was a bitterness of both grief and defiance in her voice, but no sign of a quaver. "Till a bunch of you high-handed cowboys made us go 'way around a place where they were rounding up cattle. And—and I reckon you know what happened."

Cleve Havens didn't know what had happened, and said so. But the absence of a man with this immigrant wagon brought a very thoughtful and worried look to his dark, quiet-tempered face.

Without further explanation, the girl clucked to her team, slapped the lines urgently over their sweaty backs and the heavily loaded wagon started creaking slowly again up the rocky slant of the rise. The older of the two boys, who looked to be about twelve, walloped his pony up alongside the cowboy.

"We quicksanded crossing Tobias Creek and Pa got drowned," he said soberly. "Judy thinks them X Bar cowboys made us go around a-purpose to get us in trouble at the crossing. But they come a-whoopin' to help us when I rode back and asked 'em. I keep telling her any other crossing might have been jist as bad, but she won't listen. She keeps calling it murder. I wisht you'd make her listen to reason, mister, because if I figgered it was murder, I'd—I'd kill ever' dad-blasted one of 'em!"

Cleve could see that the boy was close to tears. "It wasn't murder, sonny," he said gravely, "nor nowheres near it. That X Bar outfit is rough on nesters and immigrants, but not that rough." He lifted his horse into a lope past the straggling cattle to overtake the wagon again, and the boy followed.

The bony gray team had stopped to puff again on the heavy grade, but the girl did not turn her head as Cleve and her brother rode up.

"Judy," said Cleve Havens, as friend-

Copyright, 1946, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally published in the Second July, 1946, issue of Ranch Romances

ly as if he had known her always instead of only just now learning her name, "I'm mighty sorry you lost your pa, but there ain't any sense in blaming them X Bar boys for it. One crossing is as dangerous as another on Tobias Creek when it's up. They made you go around to keep your stock from getting mixed up with the roundup, so as to save you both trouble. You can take my word for it—that's all there was to it!"

"Your word!" said the girl. "How do I know you weren't one of them?"

"I reckon it wouldn't cost you nothing to look at me and find out!"

The stiff porch of blue-flowered sunbonnet started to turn toward him, then stopped abruptly.

"I don't aim to be hateful," said the voice under it in a slightly less bitter tone, "but I don't know who you are and I don't care. If you had business coming to my wagon, I wish you would please state it and then go away!"

"I'd heard," said the cowboy slowly, "that there was an immigrant family traveling through, and I made up my mind to come make an offer. But since what's happened, maybe I better hadn't."

"You mean," inquired the voice under the sunbonnet sarcastically, "an offer to sell us land that don't belong to you, like men did back in Oklahoma?"

"No," said Cleve, and there was no hint of joking in his tone. "I was aiming to offer to marry you—if you'd have me."

"I was not aware," she said, "that gentlemen were in the habit of offering to marry girls they've never even seen!"

"Oh, it ain't exactly a habit. But I expect there's a heap of things about the big lonesome country that you ain't aware of, Judy. One of 'em is that it ain't considered polite not to look at a body when you talk to 'em. But never mind. I won't bother you no more. So long, and good traveling!"

He raised his broad hat in unseen salute to the girl, then his buckskin gauntlet in the same gesture to the boy on the pony. "Adios, Buckshot. Don't let the buzzards roost on them cattle!"

At a slow, easy lope he rode off the way he had come. He had gone hardly a hundred yards when the button on the sorrel pony came hell-busting after him.

"Hey, Mister Cowboy," he panted. "Come on back. Sis wants to ask you something."

"If you don't want a soreback horse, Buckshot, you better git your saddle blanket back under the hull where it belongs," said Cleve.

"It'll keep," shrugged the boy, breaking through his freckles with a knowing grin. "You jist want me to be busy fixing it while you're making sweet-talk to Judy."

"Quick on the trigger, ain't you, Buckshot?"

"If I had a saddle like your'n," observed the boy, ignoring the ribbing, "the blanket wouldn't always be slipping. You coming back or ain't you?"

WITH A SHRUG Cleve turned and rode back with the boy. Judy's head was still turned away, but she spoke very promptly when Cleve rode up by the wheel. Her voice had lost its tone of bitterness now, and was merely flat and impersonal.

"First I want you to understand I'm not begging a favor of you. If you don't want the job, please just say so. My team is going tender on me. I've got the tools and shoes and nails. Can I hire you to shoe them for me?"

"No, you can't," said Cleve bluntly. "What do you take me for?"

"For a lazy, no-account cow chouser!" cried the girl hotly. "An arrogant, pridebound, hateful—"

"Wup, here!" Cleve's tolerant drawl broke in. "I never said I wouldn't plate your team for you. I only said you couldn't hire me."

"I suppose," retorted the girl with a toss of her sunbonnet that almost gave him a glimpse of her face, "that you expect me to marry you just to get my horses shod."

"Well, I've knowed gals to marry for less. What you don't seem to savvy is that it ain't cow country custom for a

man to take pay for helping out somebody that needs it."

"And is it the custom for men to offer to marry girls they've never even seen?"

"A cowhand can git mighty lonesome for womenfolks," said Cleve gravely. "I've knowed a good many boys to order their wives by catalog, and it turned out all right. However, that ain't what was ailing me. The question right now is—do you want your team shod or don't you?"

The girl chose to ignore his question to ask one of her own. "Then what was ailing you, Mister Cowboy?"

"Well, since it didn't work, I may as well tell you. I'm riding for wages, but I sure don't aim to all my life. I've got me a little piece of land with a spring on it and a little bunch of cattle started. My wage job don't give me time to look after 'em right. But if I quit, I can't save no money to build up with. So I got to figgering if I had me a wife to live on the place and sorter look after things so I could go on working—well, it's just a simple business proposition, that's all."

"Why—why, you ought to be ashamed!"

"Well, I ain't!" retorted Cleve. "And I ain't got time to shoe your nags right now, either. But if you'll make camp at Cottonwood Springs, I'll ride over this evening and do it for you. And since you're so dad-blamed anxious to pay for the job, I'll name you a price not figgered in money that you can pay mighty easy."

The girl's spine stiffened. "Name it," she said.

"All right. I shoe your horses for one good look at your face, payment in advance."

Without answering, the girl very deliberately turned so that the sunbonnet no longer hid her features. Cleve somehow managed to keep his expression from showing either surprise or shock, but it wasn't easy. For the face he saw was like a grotesque Halloween mask, puffed and lumpy-looking, its skin a repulsive pattern of purplish red splotches, its blue eyes squinting through red rims.

"Now," said the girl defiantly, "do you still want to marry me, Mister Cowboy?"

"Why not?" The cowboy shrugged, batting his eyes to conceal any tendency to stare, or maybe to hold down a grin. "You're able-bodied enough to chop your own wood and chouse around after a few cows, ain't you?"

"What am I supposed to do now—offer to let you feel my muscle?"

The cowboy shrugged again. "I'll be at Cottonwood Springs this evening to shoe them horses," he said. "So long!"

"Hey, Blackie!" Again one of the boys started after him as he rode away, but a sharp spoken order from the girl stopped him.

COTTONWOOD SPRINGS was at the bottom of a wide, winding dry arroyo. Judy and the boys had made their camp under a cottonwood on a sand bar right at the bottom of it. Cleve Havens eyed the setup critically.

"You better hitch up and move your wagon and outfit up on that little bench," he advised. "You want to git washed away?"

The girl's eyes were hostile. "Did you come here to shoe horses or give advice?"

Cleve didn't answer. He called to the younger boy who was up in a tree breaking off dead limbs for firewood. "Hey, Butch, climb down here and help me git this camp moved."

"His name isn't Butch," said the girl. "And the camp doesn't need moving."

The skinny-meated, shaggy-haired boy swung down out of the tree as agile as a monkey. "Hellzatwister, Judy," he grinned, "I rather be called Butch than Leander any day."

"Okay, Butch," said Cleve. "You start taking down the tent while I hitch up. Where's Buckshot?"

"Buckshot?" Butch grinned wider as he caught on. "Oh, you mean Buckshot! He's grazing the stock off up the draw."

"If you mean my other brother," sniffed the girl primly, "his name is Obadiah."

"Butch," said the cowboy, ignoring her, "you better go warn Buckshot not to let his cows scatter too much along the bottom. The arroyo can flood suddener than an upset waterbucket."

"Okay, Blackie!" grinned the boy and started away.

"Leander!" Judy called out sharply. "You stay right here with me!"

"Aw, Judy, what ails you?" protested Butch. "You don't think Blackie's going to git fresh with a face like yours, do you?"

"Never mind my face!" The girl's chin went up. "I reckon I can take care of myself."

"I doubt it," said Cleve dryly as the boy went jauntily off up the draw, plainly pleased with his new nickname. "Help me move this camp like a good little gal, and I've got a present for you."

Judy looked doubtfully at distant black thunderheads. "That rain is moving off the other way," she said. "I can't see that my camp needs moving."

"We'll move it anyhow," said the cowboy as he hitched the team. "This draw winds and twists around like a woman's mind. Them clouds are over the head of it right now. They may put down a gully-washer and they may not, but there ain't no sense in taking the chance. You can carry them pots up by hand. They're too hot to load in the wagon anyhow."

"All right," said Judy after a moment's hesitation. "But you don't have to be so dog-taked bossy about it."

"I'm getting in practice," grinned Cleve, "for when I marry me a woman to look after that place of mine!"

"I'm glad it won't be me," said Judy with a shrug of slender shoulders, then got busy with the camp moving and said no more.

SHIFTING camp a few yards up onto a flat bench above the high water line did not take long. It was done, and Cleve Havens, now alias Blackie, had the team unharnessed and ready to start shoeing when Leander, alias Butch, came back.

"Me and Oba—I mean Buckshot—done shoved the stock up onto the flats, Blackie," he reported. "Say, what you got in that little sack?"

"Something I swiped from the cook at the QB wagon," said Cleve with a wink. "It's a present for Judy."

"Thank you, but I don't want it. All I want is to get my horses shod!"

"Aw, shucks, Judy!" complained Butch. "Maybe it's sugar and you could make us all some taffy."

Cleve helped himself to a tin cup, dipped it half full of water, poured a generous helping of the granular white stuff out of the little bag into it and stirred.

"It's medicine," he said, looking severely at the girl. "Epsom salts."

Even its puffy redness could not hide the shocked, startled look that came over the girl's face. As Cleve came toward her, cup in hand, she suddenly grabbed up a stick from her pile of firewood and struck him with it. It was only a small branch of dead cottonwood, light and brittle, and it broke in a dozen pieces at the blow, without doing any particular damage. It was the cowboy's turn to look startled now, but instead of getting mad, he grinned a little sheepishly.

"I wasn't aiming you should take this, Judy. I was aiming for you to take a rag and swab it on your face, then leave it dry there. It maybe ain't the best treatment in the world for pizen ivy, but it's the best we've got handy and it will help dry up the rash."

"Well, for gosh sakes," said Judy, looking almost ready to cry. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just got a little too smart for my britches, I reckon. I had no business trying to joke a girl that's just lost her pa. But this stuff is sure enough good for pizen ivy. Will you try it, Judy?"

"Yes, I will," said Judy in a suddenly subdued tone. "I'll try anything. But—but how did you know it was poison ivy?"

"Because," said the cowboy gravely, but with the hint of a twinkle in his black eyes, "I didn't figger anything else

could possibly make a purty face like yours look so awful."

"Now you're joking me again. You never have seen my face looking natural—to know whether it's purty or not."

"And like as not I never will, unless you decide to stop in this part of the country instead of traveling on to wherever it is you think you're going."

Instantly the girl's eyes were on the defensive again. "Is that," she inquired sarcastically, "another offer of marriage? Because if it is, maybe I'd better ask you what you'd think of a girl already engaged and on her way to marry a rancher out in Estancia, New Mexico, if she let herself be stopped on the way by the first crazy cowboy that happened to ask her?"

"I'd think," replied Cleve with an exaggerated sigh, "that it's about time I was shutting my mouth and shoeing them horses!"

"You know you don't have to shoe them if you don't want to!"

"Gal," said Cleve in the flat, dry way of speaking that cowboys sometimes have, "I'd tack shoes on a tender team for you just the same if you was a one-eyed sheepherder's widow with fourteen kids and a wooden leg. Now stop pestering me and let me git at it."

THE HORSES' hoofs were worn so short that they didn't require much trimming, and Cleve was a quick hand with rasp and hammer. Even with time spent showing Butch and Buckshot how it was done, the job didn't take long. Cleve was glad the girl had sense enough not to offer him payment again. But he wasn't sorry that she did ask him to stay and eat supper with them.

A sowbelly, beef and beans man, Cleve never had liked rabbit stew, but tonight it tasted good. He couldn't make up his mind whether that was because of the dry salt pork seasoning in it or because a woman had cooked it.

"This jasper you're fixing to marry is a lucky son of a gun, Judy," he grinned. "Any woman that can make rabbit fit to eat is bound to be a hell of a good cook. He sure is lucky!"

"You men!" said Judy with a fine toss of her head and a flash of challenging blue eyes. "All you ever think about is your stomachs."

"Not me. If I ever marry, I aim to find me a gal who can ride and rope and chop wood and hoe turnips and milk cows and make herself useful besides being a good cook. If she's also got sense enough to keep out of pizen ivy, so much the better. By the way, I rode that Estancia country some myownself about three years ago. Maybe your intended is somebody I know."

"No—I think not," said Judy quickly. "He hasn't been there even a year. You see, he just recently bought a—well, a big cow ranch near there, then sent word for me to come right away."

"He could have got you there quicker and safer by buying you a railroad ticket up through Kansas and on the new Santa Fé line as far as Lamy. Or as long as he's well heeled enough to be buying himself a big ranch, looks like he might have come after you and saved you this trip."

The girl looked off into the darkness across the broad arroyo now four feet deep with racing muddy water, though not a drop of rain had fallen here. She had taken off her sunbonnet, and there was a reddish-golden glint to her hair in the firelight.

"Pa'd been restless to move ever since Ma died," she said slowly, without turning. "He'd heard there was homestead land you could raise beans on in that Estancia country, so this was as good a time to move as any. Poor Pa. Sometimes it seems like me and the boys just can't make out without him."

"It's tough," said Cleve. He stared silently into the fire a few moments, then cleared his throat.

"Judy," he said kindly, "I sure don't want to butt into your business, but here's what I been thinking, and I ain't joshing you this time. I can take a few days off and ride to the nearest telegraph. There ain't no telegraph in Estancia, but I know them railroad boys at Lamy. If

I send them a message for your—your friend that your pa got drowned and you and the boys are on the road alone, and you'd like for him to come and meet you, they'll git it to him somehow. How about it?"

"No," said the girl without looking at him. "You mustn't do that."

"You mean you're scared he wouldn't come?"

"I mean—well, you see, I'm expecting him—Bill—Bill Willis—to meet us anyhow. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if he's on his way already. There's no need to get in touch with him."

"I see," said the cowboy, flicking his cigarette into the fire. "Well, good night."

He was on his horse before the girl spoke. "I wish you'd let me pay you for shoeing the horses."

Cleve gave a grunt that was half exasperation, half amusement. "There you go again! Well, good-by, Judy, and good luck to you."

"Good-by, Mr.—why, I don't even know who I'm saying good-by to."

"Butch give me a good new name. How about using that?"

"All right," said Judy, coming nearer to a smile than Cleve had thus far seen. "Thanks a lot and good-by—Blackie."

"Give my regards to Bill Willis when you see him," said Cleve and rode away into the growing darkness. He rode by where the boys were waiting for their hungry little bunch of stock to get full enough to bed down. It was in his mind to ask them about Bill Willis, what sort of a jasper he was, but it wasn't his business.

"Well, I'm taking out, boys," he said.

"Shucks," said Butch, "I wisht you was a-going with us, Blackie. You could learn us to be cowboys."

The cowboy laughed. "Hell, all you need for that is to be split up the middle and cracked on top! So long, boys. Take good care of your sis and keep her out of any more pizen ivy."

The good-bys they called out after him sounded so regretful that it bothered him a little as he rode away.

JUDY AND the boys had just finished supper at a dry camp two evenings later when Cleve Havens rode up. "Evening, folks," he breezed.

The girl's face, in the firelight, was grotesquely white with the smear of dried salts all over it, but it was plainly less swollen than before.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

"Just happened to be riding over this way," shrugged Cleve, not mentioning that he had ridden a good twenty miles extra to get here, "so I thought I'd drop by and see how the pizen ivy's getting along."

"It's better, thanks." Judy sounded politely cool and distant. "May I offer you some coffee?"

"You just as well," grinned Cleve, "for I'm going to help myself anyhow. How you fixed for water?"

"All right," said the girl. "The keg's still half full. I reckon we'll hit a spring or a river or something tomorrow."

"I reckon you won't," said Cleve dryly. "Not before day after tomorrow evening, traveling by day."

"But the stock! They can't do without water that long!"

"They'll have to," said Cleve, "unless you want to turn back. This is a mighty dry stretch."

The girl didn't say anything, but Cleve thought she looked ready to cry at any minute.

"Shucks, Judy," complained Butch, "I don't see what we got to go all the way to that darned Estancia for anyhow. Whyn't we go back with Blackie and—"

"Because," broke in Judy severely, "Estancia is where Pa was headed for, and it's where we're going to." She turned to the cowboy. "What makes you think we won't hit water tomorrow? We've hit it every day so far."

Cleve shrugged. "I ain't used to having my word doubted on such matters," he said. "But I reckon we can make it through all right if we hitch up again right now and travel by night while it's cool."

"We?" said Judy. "You mean—"

"Sure. You don't figger I'm going to let a fool woman and a couple of kids tackle a dry drive like that by themselves, do you? Buckshot, you and Butch saddle up and fetch the team. I'll help Judy load the camp."

"Okay, Blackie!" The boys spoke in quick unison.

"Wait! Hold on a minute!" cried Judy, but they were already gone.

She turned accusingly to the cowboy. "I may be a fool woman," she said crisply, "but not fool enough not to see through you, Mr. Cowboy. And I don't consider it proper for an engaged girl to put herself under that much obligation to you or any other man. The boys and me will make out all right. You go on back to your job—if you've still got one."

"You talk purt' near as salty as you look, Judy," grinned the cowboy. "But if you're thinking about my offer of marriage, that's done been withdrawn. Where was it you said you expected Bill Willis to meet you?"

"Why—why, at the Pecos River, if it's any of your business."

"That's a right far piece from here. How you want this bedding rolled?"

"I'll roll it," said the girl very quietly. "Please—please go away."

CLEVE didn't talk to her or come near her any more after that while getting ready to move out. But he didn't go away either. Almost without speaking to her again, he helped them through a day and two nights of a long dry drive.

It was he who ordered the stops for rest, he who took his turn both on the wagon and driving the loose stock so that Judy and the boys could snatch brief periods of sleep and rest. It was he who brought them at last, in the parching sun of the second noon, in sight of green cottonwoods along a red sandy arroyo.

"Yonder," he told them, "we're going to find water."

But when the thirst-tormented cattle reached the arroyo there was no water in sight. Only a slight dampness of the fine, red sand along its bottom. Much of the poison ivy rash on the girl's face had cleared up, but the small-chinned oval prettiness now revealed looked drawn and haggard, and the clearness of her blue eyes was smothered in a look of bitter hopelessness as she watched the gaunt cattle snuffing futilely and licking out their thirst-parched tongues at the slight moistness of the sand.

Cleve rode up beside the wagonwheel looking whiskery but neither tired nor worried.

"Judy," he said. "do you realize that I ain't never seen you smile?"

"I'm sorry, Blackie," said the girl and turned her head away. "It don't look like I've got much to smile about."

When she looked again Cleve and the two boys were chousing the little bunch of cattle and horses in a close-packed bunch, back and forth along the bottom of the arroyo, driving them again and again up and down the sandy strip. It was several minutes before Judy saw the ooze of water beginning to appear in the trampled sand as the hard hoofs packed it down, and realized what they were doing. In less than a quarter of an hour cloudy water was deep enough in the clean sand for the livestock to drink.

This time when Cleve rode grinning up to the wagonwheel she gave him a wavery, but wide and grateful smile.

"Gee, Blackie," she said, "you know about everything, don't you?"

"There's a couple of things I ain't right sure about," he replied gravely. Then his challenging grin came back. "But I sure as hell don't aim to ask!"

He stayed only long enough to show Buckshot how to dig a shallow sand-well for their own drinking water, to help them make camp, and to eat sparingly of the fried sowbelly, gravy and fried batterbread that Judy cooked, then got on his horse.

"I reckon you'll make out all right from here on," he said. "And no doubt you'll have help for crossing the Pecos. So long, Judy. So long, cowboys."

"Wait!" cried the girl. "Blackie, there's something I've got to say to you."

With a quizzical scratch of his dark head, Cleve reined up and waited. Judy bit her lip and was a long time speaking.

"Blackie," she said finally, "I was awful hateful to you, accusing you of being part responsible for Pa's accident. I just want to tell you how ashamed I am—after all you've done for us—and sorry."

"Don't talk like that, gal," grinned the cowboy with a wink at the boys, "or I'm liable to make you that offer again."

This time as before, he rode away without looking back. "Bill's going to meet her at the Pecos, you idjit," he told himself with dry severity as he rode out of sight. "That's one rendezvous you ain't got no business at, cowboy."

UNDER the scorch of a blazing noonday sun, Judy Gorman drew up at the east bank of the Pecos and looked across its breadth of reddish sand and water with sober misgivings. A few old wagon tracks slanted down the bank at various angles and out again at different spots on the opposite bank were all there was to tell her, in a vague sort of way, that here was a crossing. Butch and Buckshot sat on their chicken-ketcher saddles alongside each front wheel and shared her doubts, remembering their tragedy at the crossing of Tobias Creek.

"We better camp on this side tonight, Judy," suggested Buckshot, "and hit 'er in the morning when the team's plumb fresh."

Judy nodded, and they made camp back a piece from the river.

"I wisht ol' Blackie had come along," sighed Butch as they hitched up the next morning. "He'd know how to git us acrost easy."

"Never mind," said Judy. "You can see there's some rock bottom. We'll make it all right."

"I'm going to scout it out a-horseback first," announced Buckshot, starting to climb his pony. "That's the way the cowboys does it."

He swung into the saddle, then abruptly rode a few yards away from the river instead of toward it, pointing excitedly with his arm. "Wup, Judy, someone's a-coming! I'll bet it's ol' Blackie!"

His bet was right. Cleve Havens reined up at the wagon on a tall sweaty sorrel.

"Howdy," he breezed, slapping Buckshot a wallop on the shoulder that nearly knocked him out of the saddle, then turning to Judy. "Say, you're plumb purty without your pizen ivy!"

He rode closer, looking at the girl's flushed face as if it were the eighth wonder of the world. "Waiting for help to git acrost the crick?"

"Why—why, no, thank you," said Judy. "I think—I mean I'm sure we can make it all right, thank you."

"That's twice you've thanked me and I ain't done nothing yet," grinned the cowboy. "Where's Bill Willis? I figgered he'd be here to help you ford."

Both boys started to speak, but a look from Judy hushed them. "Bill must have been delayed," said Judy in a small voice. "But I expect he'll be along any minute. He—"

"Sure he will," agreed the cowboy, raising an arm to point toward a distant rider loping toward them from the wide flat beyond the river. "Maybe that's him yonder. Does it look like him to you?"

Judy raised her hand to shade her eyes and gazed hard at the blob of dust barely distinguishable as a rider.

"Why—why, yes, it does." She turned to Cleve with her small chin high. "I told you he'd meet me here, didn't I?"

"Sure," shrugged the cowboy. "I just figgered that if he didn't— well, so long, Judy. So long, boys. I got to get back to Texas to see a job about some work."

"Hey, hold on here, Blackie!" Butch called out as Cleve whirled his horse with a flourish and started to ride away. "Ain't you even—"

Judy's quick hand over his mouth hushed him.

"Hellzatwister, sis," broke out Buckshot. "I'm going to fetch him back and—"

It took fast footwork, but Judy managed to head him off and catch his bridle rein.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Obadiah! Oh, I wish—oh, gosh! Look, boys, he's coming back anyway. What am I going to do?"

"That's your fence corner, sis," grinned Buckshot. "Git out of it the best way you can."

WHEN CLEVE HAVENS rode up this time he wasn't grinning and he wasn't breezy. He stepped long-legged off his sorrel and stood straight and stiff-backed before the girl. He cleared his throat, opened his mouth, then had to shut it again before the words would come out. When they did come they were abrupt and startling.

"Judy," he said, "are you fixing to cross the Pecos and marry Bill Willis, or stay on this side and marry me?"

"Please, Blackie," she said in a low, unhappy tone. "Please go away."

"Not till you talk turkey," said the cowboy stubbornly. "Bill's going to be here in a mighty few minutes, and I want this settled one way or the other. Is it going to be him or me?"

Judy turned to face him then, her chin high, her eyes flashing. "You sound almighty high and mighty about a—a simple business proposition," she flared. "Go hire you somebody to chop your wood and tend your cattle for his board! You can't hire me!"

"Judy," he said slowly, "I ought to have my tongue yanked out by the roots for ever making that kind of talk to a girl like you. But it ain't a business proposition I happen to be talking about now."

He glanced toward the two all-ears boys standing by, then toward the rider now reined up on the opposite bank, surveying the crossing. "I ain't got time to say it fancy, and I wouldn't know how if I could. I ain't offering you this time. I'm begging you. And the reason is that I sure enough love you, Judy, so bad that it gives me the big lonesome."

The girl's clear blue eyes met his now without wavering. "I reckon you came back once too often, Blackie," she said. "This time I've got the big lonesome, too."

The cowboy's arms were suddenly tight around her, his lips putting an end to further talk even if she'd had the wind for it.

In a moment he looked up, watching the rider from the west already halfway across the sandy ford.

"It looks," he grinned, "as if Bill Willis is arriving just about two minutes too late."

"Oh, gosh," said Judy drawing away from him. "That's what I was trying to tell you, Blackie! I never saw this man before in my life. There—there wasn't any Bill Willis. I just made him up to—to—"

"Why, you purty, deceiving little scallywag!" grinned the cowboy, hooking his arm possessively through hers before turning to greet the dripping stranger coming up out of the river. "I've a mighty good notion to spank you!"

BLISSFUL IGNORANCE

THERE WERE many millionaires created in Leadville, Colorado during the colorful, tough boom days, but none was more colorful than an Irishman named John Morrissey. After Morrissey struck it rich, one of the first things he bought was a diamond watch. Everyone knew that generous, lovable John Morrissey couldn't tell time, but they had fun asking him the time of day. "See for yourself," Morrissey would reply, "then you'll know I'm not lying to yez!"

Since he had never been to school, arithmetic was a mystery to him. One afternoon he arrived at his mine, and called down the shaft, "I have a bottle. How many of yez are down there in the mine?" Upon being told there were seven men, he hollered down the shaft, "Half of you come up for a drink!"

When old Father Robinson was building his church in Leadville, he approached Morrissey for funds to buy a chandelier. "Sure, Father Robinson; here's five hundred for you. But are you sure you have someone to play it?"

——*Edna Stewart*

WHEN HE RODE OUT to recover his stolen horse,

he found an angel of a girl . . . in an outlaw paradise

THE HORSE THIEVES had four days start before young Joe Kelleher came in from roundup and missed Sugar Babe. He didn't take time to shave the two weeks' growth of black whiskers from his face before he got on the trail.

In spite of the whiskers, Joe was still pretty much of a boy, just past nineteen as a matter of fact. Boy enough that the tears could ooze down his cheeks when he thought of Sugar Babe being maltreated by ruffianly alleged horse-breakers, man enough that he could face a gun-toting desperado without flinching.

Three years before, he had found the starving, gangly-legged sorrel colt standing beside its dead mother, obviously a Kentucky thoroughbred, along the old Mormon Trail.

Joe had carried the colt home and raised it by hand on diluted, sweetened cow's milk. It's mother, plainly, had been stolen and practically ridden to death.

As Sugar Babe gained strength and began to show her breeding in the fine lines and the intelligent head of her, Joe began to dream of the stock he would some day get from her. And now she had been stolen.

"I won't come back without her," Joe told his parents, and knowing their son, they knew that he would not.

He was five days from home and two days into Idaho when he learned that he was on the right track. It would have been impossible to have traced any other horse, but Kentucky thoroughbreds in the West at that time were practically unknown. Joe had followed his instinct that the thieves would go west.

SUGAR

He had stopped to beg water from a section foreman on the Oregon Short Line, and asked his usual question. "Why, yes," the man replied after a moment's concentration. "I did see such an animal. Prairie schooner outfit stopped to beg water same as you're doing, and I pertickler noticed a purty little sorrel mare like you describe. Looked sorta like a dainty little lady among a gang of sectionhands."

Copyright, 1946, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in 2nd November, 1946, Ranch Romances

BABE

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

"Sure, that was Sugar Babe," Joe said eagerly.

He pressed the man for details.

"Well, the man looked to me like one of them no-good roaming horse-trading outfits. Reckon he had about twenty head of crow-baits besides your little mare, and dang near as many kids if you coulda counted 'em. I think it was two days ago they passed here."

Joe thanked the man and rode on. This looked easy. Already he had cut their lead to half, and he would have no trouble getting Sugar Babe back from such an outfit. He had expected to tangle with tough renegade outlaws. . . .

His flea-bitten gray, Freckles, was showing the strain, and Joe's bearded young face was growing gaunt and thin when he finally sighted the outfit the section boss had described. They were moving slowly down the Portneuf River amid the great reefs and crevices of black lava that had long made that region an outlaw's paradise. It looked, Joe thought, like a section of hell where the devil had let the fire go out.

The covered wagon rocked along in the dusty ruts of the old wagon road, while a kid on a pony drove a small band of loose horses just behind. Wagon and horse were exactly as the section boss had described, even to the tousle-headed youngsters peering out from under the canvas. But there wasn't an animal that remotely resembled Sugar Babe.

Joe held Freckles to a cat-footed trot, politely keeping to the dusty side of the road as he passed. A gaunt, rawboned man with sloping rounded shoulders sat in the spring seat beside an equally gaunt and rawboned woman. The man's thin, grayish whiskers were spattered on one side with tobacco juice.

The man called out genially, "Hi, neighbor," but Joe noticed that his gaze was fixed appraisingly upon Freckles. He was a horse-trader, all right.

Joe acknowledged the salute without stopping. He thought he detected a look of apprehension upon the woman's face.

IN HALF a mile he was out of sight among the rocks. He left the road and stopped behind a lava reef that towered twenty feet high. He left Freckles and climbed up where he could view the wagoneers as they passed without danger of being seen. Then, suddenly, his eyes narrowed bleakly. The loose horses came in sight and this time there were two kids driving the band—and one of them was riding Sugar Babe!

Joe's anger boiled up like a geyser. The filly was broken to saddle; Joe had gotten her used to one when she was a yearling, but even Joe had never ridden her more than a few minutes around the corral. He had wanted her to be fully grown before she was ridden any distance.

From the size, he judged that Sugar Babe's rider was the oldest of the horse-trader's boys. Undoubtedly the boy had ridden Sugar Babe out in the rocks when they saw him coming. They had been taking no chances on anyone who might recognize the mare. Certainly Joe needed no further evidence that these people were the thieves.

He scrambled down, jerked his Winchester from the scabbard, and stepped up on Freckles. As the wagon reached his rock he rode around the end of it, his rifle held waist-high, pointed straight at the man on the spring seat.

The woman gave a little scream, but Joe kept his eyes on the man, and the rifle barrel that stuck up from the corner of the wagon-box in front of the driver. He wasn't surprised when the man reached for it.

"Hold it!" Joe ordered crisply, "or you'll get a bullet in the gizzard."

His tone proved that he meant it. The man's mouth fell open and he yelled, "Whoa!" He was speaking as much to Joe as to his team.

The woman whined, "I told you that feller looked like a desperado."

Joe held his Winchester steady. "I'm no outlaw," he said. "I want just one thing from you—that chestnut filly you stole back in Wyoming."

If their evident confusion wasn't an admission of guilt, then Joe didn't know what a look meant.

Sugar Babe's rider loped toward the wagon. Tense as the situation was Joe thrilled to the filly's graceful, easy gait, and the way she responded to the rein. Half consciously he noted, too, that the rider looked just as graceful as the filly.

The young rider cried out, "Uncle John! What's wrong?"

In his amazement Joe Kelleher let the

muzzle of his rifle point toward the ground. That was no boy's voice. And now he saw a mass of red-gold hair under the floppy old hat. The rider in faded calico shirt and denim overalls was a girl! Not a bad-looking girl, either, thought Joe as he took in her smooth, sun-browned face, her wide blue eyes and generous, red-lipped mouth. Nevertheless, he hastily covered the old man again with his rifle.

"This locoed gent claims we stole your chestnut filly from him, Daisy Belle," the man drawled.

Defiance flashed over the girl's face. "That's a lie," she cried heatedly. "The man gave Bunny to me."

Joe asked ironically, "What man?"

Daisy Belle seemed to lose some of her confidence. "Why—why the two men. They said they had no use for her so they gave her to me."

A likely story, Joe thought scornfully. No use for Sugar Babe, who would bring two hundred dollars of any man's money, even here in the West where thoroughbreds were not appreciated.

He said, "Then why did you hide in the rocks when I passed you back yonder?"

The girl's face blazed with shock and anger. She cried out, "I did nothing of the kind. I often ride Bunny off the road to get her used to being alone."

The old man said, "What proof you got she belongs to you?"

Watchful as an eagle, Joe replied, "Plenty. She's got my brand for one thing."

The girl cried confidently, "Then you're mistaken. Bunny hasn't got a brand."

"She's got a brand and her name ain't Bunny. It's Sugar Babe." His voice changed coaxingly. "Come here, Sugar."

BEFORE the girl could act, Sugar Babe stretched out her neck, half jerking Daisy Belle over her withers by the tightly held reins, and walked over to Joe, her nose nuzzling his leg.

Grimly triumphant, Joe said, "No brand, eh?" He flicked the filly's flaxen mane over to the other side of her neck, and there was a small brand exactly like the one on Freckle's shoulder.

They had no answer to that. They hadn't known of the brand. Daisy Belle's defiant little face dissolved into a picture of misery. She threw her arms around the filly's neck and sobbed heartbrokenly, "Oh, Bunny!"

Joe stared. He had been perfectly sure of himself, but one thing was beyond his understanding. The girl's grief was genuine. He felt sorry for her, but he could do nothing about it. Sugar Babe was his.

The man sighed and spat a stream of tobacco juice out of the corner of his mouth. "Guess we got nothing more to say, stranger. I thought it was a little queer them giving a valuable critter like that to Daisy Belle. Must of figgered the owner was right on their tails. Let the man have his mare, Daisy Belle."

Face streaked with tears the girl turned and slowly removed her saddle. Uncertainly Joe fingered his whiskers. He had let the rifle rest across his saddle. Daisy Belle's lips quivered as she handed Joe the hackamore rope.

He looked at her more closely. Her clothes were old and shabby, but somehow she didn't seem to belong with these shiftless people.

Daisy Belle looked up and tried to smile. "I knew it couldn't be true," she said. "It was the only thing of my very own I ever had in my life, and things like that just don't happen to me."

There was weary resignation in her tone which cut into young Joe like a knife. But, dammit, Sugar Babe belonged to him. He'd raised her by hand, and he was proud of her.

The old man was speaking. "My name's Hathaway, stranger, and jest to show there's no hard feelings I'd like you to have dinner with us."

Joe hesitated. He didn't believe Hathaway was up to any good, but it was a neighborly gesture, and it might give him a chance to find out if they had been telling him the truth. He wouldn't have believed Hathaway, but this girl—

He looked at Daisy Belle. If she asked him he would stay. She caught his meaning. "Please stay," she urged.

Joe said, "All right, I'm agreeable and thank you kindly."

HATHAWAY left the road and drove toward a shaded spot on the river bank a short distance away. Joe and Daisy Belle lingered. She said tentatively, "You say her name is Sugar Babe?"

He told her how he had come to find the colt, how he had raised her, and in doing so he had to tell her considerable about his home and his own plans and aspirations. As they talked Daisy Belle constantly patted Sugar Babe, and the little filly plainly liked it. Joe watched them.

"How about you?" he asked presently. "Where you folks bound for?"

She answered wearily, "Oregon, I guess. We been pretty nearly everywhere, but seldom twice in the same place. My uncle is a horse-trader."

"Must be a tough kind of life." Joe had all the natural contempt of a true pioneer for a mere drifter.

There was an awkward silence while Daisy Belle held her face against Sugar Babe's face. Suddenly she turned and faced him. "Listen," she said earnestly, "Uncle John asked you to dinner because he wants to try to cheat you out of Sugar Babe and your other horse in a trade. Don't listen to him."

"Let him try."

"But please believe me, we're not horse-thieves. We didn't steal Sugar Babe. Two men overtook us. They said they had won her in a card game, but that she was a nuisance to them. They wouldn't trade her to my uncle, but they gave her to me because they said they could see I liked her."

And you, Joe thought, are telling me this so I'll give her to you because you liked her. Not a chance!

Daisy Belle read his mind and flushed angrily. "Don't you dare think I want you to give her to me," she blazed. "I wouldn't take her from you if you begged me to. If you're going to eat with us, come on. Aunt Em is motioning that it's ready."

"Thanks," Joe said coldly, "I've changed my mind. I'll be going back."

He stepped up on Freckles and tightened Sugar Babe's leading rope. Daisy Belle wouldn't look at him. She started toward the wagon, suddenly turned back and threw her arms around Sugar Babe's arched neck in a swift parting embrace. Then with a choking sob, she turned and ran, not toward the wagon, but to vanish among the lava rocks. . . .

Every once in a while as he jogged along, Joe would burst out with a single cuss word, catch himself and jab the innocent Freckles with the spurs. Once he gave Sugar Babe's rope a vicious jerk as she playfully grabbed for a twig just beyond her reach.

He couldn't get the picture of Daisy Belle's tearful face out of his mind. She had really loved Sugar Babe, and he didn't question her statement at all that she had never had anything really her own in her whole life, although he did question her statement that the mare had been given to her by strangers. Her uncle had probably stolen Sugar Babe and persuaded some stranger to pretend to give her to Daisy Belle as a cover up. He was sure that Daisy Belle herself had not been involved in anything crooked.

Just before sundown he made camp, hobbled his horses, cooked himself a skilletful of bacon and opened a can of tomatoes. He rolled out his blankets, but he couldn't sleep.

He had lain there perhaps a couple of hours when he angrily tossed the blankets back and pulled on his boots. "The hell with it," he said, as he caught and saddled Feckles, picked up Sugar Babe's lead rope. When he rode away he was headed back down the river—to overtake the Hathaway camp.

His thoughts were complex, but clear. He was going to offer Sugar Babe to Daisy Belle. If she accepted the mare it would be all right. Sugar Babe would have a kind mistress. Joe would have to swallow his pride when he got home and admit failure, but he could do it for the

sake of finding out just what sort of a girl Daisy Belle was. His mind would be at peace, and he had suddenly made the discovery that peace of mind was worth even more than a pet horse.

IT WAS after midnight when he saw the Hathaway wagon in the moonlight, but he sensed instantly that something was wrong. Shadowy figures were passing hurriedly between the campfire and the wagon, when everybody should have been in bed. He looked around him. There was no sign anywhere around the camp of Hathaway's horses.

Deciding that riding unheralded into a middle of the night camp might be bad business, he called, "Hello, Hathaway. This is Joe Kelleher."

Somebody doused the fire with a bucket of water, and he glimpsed a woman's figure darting toward the wagon.

He called again, "I'm Kelleher. What's the matter?"

Daisy Belle answered. "Come on in."

Mrs. Hathaway and her ragged brood were ranged in a scared line against the wagon. From beneath the canvas cover issued a series of agonized groans. "Somebody sick?" he asked.

Daisy Belle replied, "Horse thieves raided us in the night. Uncle John tried to stop them, and they shot him. We're afoot." She didn't ask why he had come back, but she stepped over and gave Sugar Babe a little pat.

Joe suddenly felt a man's responsibility for the helpless Hathaways. He examined John Hathaway. Despite the man's expressed belief that his last hour had come, Joe didn't believe the wound was too serious if they could get a doctor.

The others stood back and watched him, awaiting his decision.

"Which way did they go, and when?" he asked.

"Back the way you came," Daisy Belle said. "It couldn't have been much more than an hour ago."

Joe remembered that both horses had wanted to turn off at a certain place. He must have just missed meeting the horse rustlers.

"Look," he said, "there's a town a few miles ahead. Daisy Belle, you get on Sugar Babe and go for help. I'll start after your horses."

She cried, "Joe, you mustn't! You'll be killed."

"I'll be all right," he said calmly. "I expected a brush with some horse thieves when I left home, and I'm heeled." Inwardly, he was seething with excitement, and more than a little scared.

He rebuilt the fire and put the girl's saddle on Sugar Babe. He made her mount, and for a moment she sat on Sugar Babe looking down at him with soft eyes that were luminous in the moonlight. Then, suddenly, she leaped down and kissed him on the mouth. . . .

Joe found the spot where the horses had turned off the trail. Examination showed that they had gone west, toward a high mountain range. A knife-gash pass, plainly marked by purple sky lay directly ahead.

Daybreak had come, and the sun was rising when Joe reached the top of the pass. Beyond lay a wide valley. Joe used his head. The thieves would hole up in some cove or canyon rather than risk crossing that valley in daylight. They had every reason to suppose that they would be free from pursuit, anyway.

The rustlers had showed their caliber by shooting Hathaway. They wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who tried to get their loot. Joe had been prepared to shoot it out if necessary to reclaim Sugar Babe, but he wondered what he was doing here risking his life for the property of a no-good, crooked horse-trader.

It would be easy to go back and report that he had failed to track the horses. For that matter, why go back at all? Things might be easier if he never saw either Daisy Belle or Sugar Babe again.

BUT JOE rode on. It simply wasn't in him to turn back from any job without trying to get it done. Still, he felt lonely, and there was a palpitation around his heart that he couldn't stop.

He was cutting across the side of a mountain, following a deer trail through

the chaparral, when Freckles pricked up his ears. Joe stopped the horse, leaned ahead in the saddle and gazed down into what seemed to be a box canyon. A moment later he saw one of Hathaway's wagon horses poke its head out of the thick brush.

Breathing hard, Joe dismounted and moved closer to the edge of the canyon. It didn't take long to get the picture. There was no entrance except from below, and that was almost choked by cliffs and brush.

He didn't hesitate. Carrying his rope and his rifle he clambered down as far as he could get. Then, with a thirty-foot ledge below him, he looped the rope over a boulder and let himself down over the ledge. He found footing and released the rope.

He came upon the outlaws' camp from above. First he saw two saddled horses, then the figure of a man rolled up in blankets. The second outlaw was somewhere on guard below.

Joe sized up the situation carefully. He would have to dispose of the sleeping man first.

He crossed an open space soundlessly but swiftly, and paused for a moment above the sleeping outlaw. Then, suddenly, he kicked the blanket off, and the startled outlaw awoke to find the barrel of a rifle against his chest.

"What the—"

"Shut up," Joe rasped, and the man subsided. There was a ticklish moment while Joe got the man's sixgun. He noticed a rifle under the fender of one saddle, and realized that the second outlaw probably had his rifle with him.

Joe made the man stand. He had to tie him up and gag him before he could even think of the second man. He had just started to drop the noose of his rope over the man's shoulder when he heard a sound. He jerked his head around. There, fifty feet down the canyon, was the second outlaw.

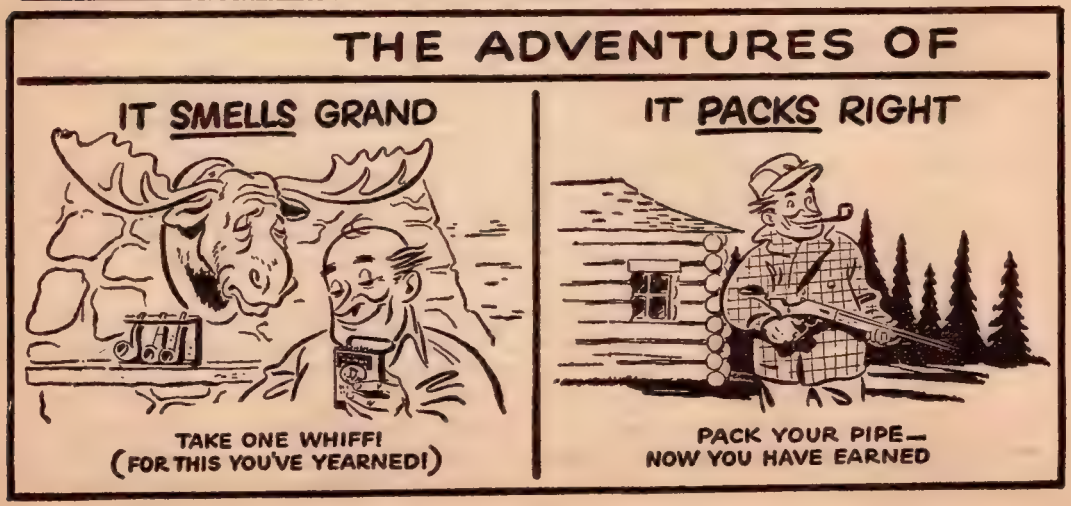
The man's momentary surprise was all that saved Joe, but already the man's rifle was coming up. Joe lunged for the horses as the gun roared. The bullet nicked his coat. The horses danced wildly as the outlaw fired a second shot at Joe.

The first outlaw, unarmed, hadn't yet collected his wits.

Joe dropped to one knee. All the fear that had been riding him was gone. He had never been cooler. He fired at what he could see of the second outlaw—his leg.

The man gave a blood-curdling shriek as he fell, his kneecap shattered by Joe's bullet. The first outlaw started to run, but stopped suddenly at Joe's command.

Joe smashed their weapons in businesslike fashion. As soon as the injured man quieted a little, Joe ordered the other to care for the wound.



"I'll send somebody back as soon as I return these stolen horses," he told them. He mounted one horse, and leading the other, soon rounded up Hathaway's scattered band.

THE AFTERNOON was waning when finally he got back to the Hathaway wagon. Daisy Belle had returned some hours before with help, and the doctor had reported that Hathaway was in no great danger. A deputy sheriff with a four man posse had belatedly arrived to search for the horse rustlers.

Joe saw Daisy Belle's expression change as he described the two outlaws.

"Why," she exclaimed breathlessly, "they gave Sugar Babe to me."

The sympathy Joe had been feeling toward the man he had wounded cooled perceptibly, and a great weight was lifted from his mind. Daisy Belle had not been lying to him. These men he had fought had stolen Sugar Babe, given her to Daisy, knowing they would get her back, along with Hathaway's animals, when the horse-trader got where they wanted.

The matter of Sugar Babe had still to be settled. Joe waited until the posse had gone before he mentioned it.

Daisy Belle was first to speak. "Joe, why did you come back?" she asked.

Joe reached over his head, snapped off a willow twig. "I just decided I wanted you to have Sugar Babe," he said. "I knowed you'd be good to her."

"I knew that was why," she said softly, "and I'll never forget how generous it was of you, but I can't take her. I told you that."

"But that was before I knew you were telling the truth about the way you got her, and you were mad," he argued.

"I'm not mad now, but I won't take her," she said firmly. "Good-by, Joe."

He realized suddenly that he could stand to go home without Sugar Babe, but not without Daisy Belle. His bearded face was earnest as he pleaded. "Daisy Belle, my pa and ma would sure be mighty surprised and pleased if they could see me bringing Sugar Babe with my wife a'-riding her."

Daisy Belle's eyes twinkled. "Oh, Joe, have you got a wife?" she gasped.

"Not yet," he said grimly, "but I will have as soon as we git to this next town. That is, if your heart ain't plumb set on staying with your uncle."

"I want to get away from him so bad I'm scared you'll think that's why I'm marrying you," she said. "But I do love you, Joe. I know me and Sugar Babe couldn't be wrong about you."

Joe answered, "Will you take Sugar Babe now—as my weddin' present?"

Daisy Belle had only to stand on tiptoe to give him her answer. ● ● ●

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

—HAPPINESS FOR ALL CONCERNED!
—with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.

It costs no more to get the best!

Squabble by Gas Light

By Todhunter Ballard

***MAYBE HE COULD** bring light to the streets of the town, but bringing light to Mary Lou's eyes was another matter*

"Go to the house," Tom told Mary. "I've

I

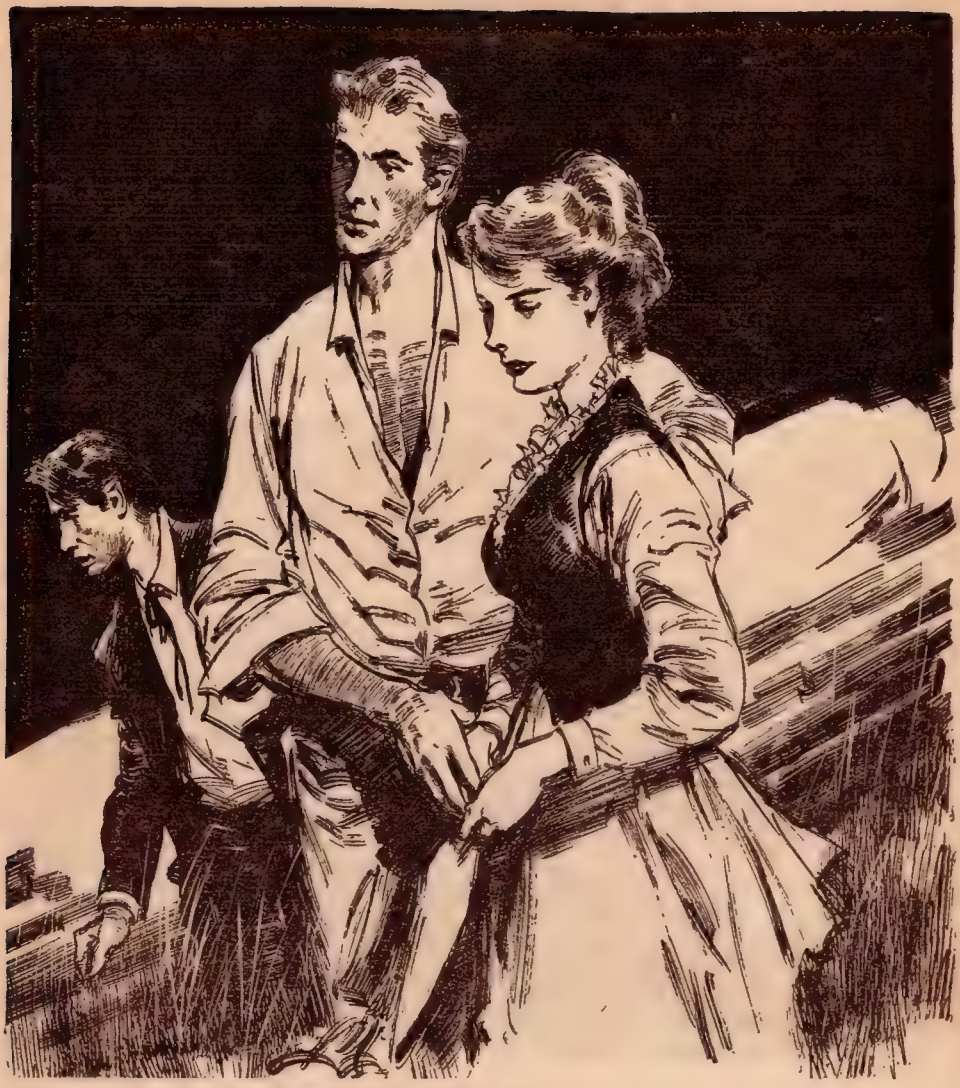
THE STAGE came into Squabble at a high run, dropping the looping grade to the floor of the narrow canyon at a breath-stealing pace and pulling up with squealing brakes before the Miners' Exchange Hotel.

I climbed down, stiff from the jolting ride, and looked for Captain Daniels in the crowd. He was not in sight, but a crudely lettered sign halfway down the block read:

SQUABBLE REVIEW AND REGISTER
JOB PRINTING
M. DANIELS, PROP.

The street was full of men, pushing along the narrow board sidewalks, but I saw no women. The camp was rough,

Copyright, 1948, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally



got to get ready to greet my lynchers!"

set back from the town, deep in the hills.

The print shop was disappointing, barely more than a box of plank with canvas walls with a canvas roof. The press was a Ramage on a wooden frame, the type cases homemade, and there was no composing stone.

I'd hardly looked around when Max Daniels hurried in. He was tall, straight as an Indian, with dark hair, handsome eyes and lashes which curved up like a girl's.

"Well, Austin." He clasped my hand. "Welcome to Squabble, the fastest-growing town on the Mother Lode. We have a job, boy, a tremendous job. We must help mold this place with our newspaper, shape it, lead the community in thought and action. That's what newspapermen are for."

published in the Second September, 1948, issue of Ranch Romances

My chest expanded. Daniels was a born orator, magnetic, with the power to pass his enthusiasm on to all who heard him.

He slapped my back. "Your uncle says that you know your business. Have you a place to stay?"

"Well—" I was shamefaced. "I have a letter from my aunt to Mrs. Foster. I didn't want to bring it. I'm grown up and—"

He didn't hear me. "Excellent," he was saying. "Remarkable woman, Mrs. Foster. She's a mother to every miner in camp. The house is clean, the food wonderful."

I nodded, not knowing quite what to say, but he didn't expect an answer.

"We're lucky to have her," Daniels went on. "First woman in camp, arrived six months ago. The thick-headed miners simply stood and stared. But I welcomed her. I leaped forward to help her with her baggage. It was all marked—Rev. Luther Foster, Oregon. I knew she was married then and it hit me, Austin. She's the prettiest woman I ever saw. But I rallied. I swept off my hat, greeting her. I said, 'Perhaps your husband is joining you?' She shook her head, just smiling.

" 'Then he must be in the north, laboring among the Indians. It's fortunate that you're married. Otherwise every man in camp would be pestering you.'

"She looked at me, Austin. She said slowly, 'Why, I guess you're right. I guess it's very fortunate that I'm married.' "

I wasn't much interested. I was only seventeen. I was much more excited by the knowledge that I was chief printer and associate editor of the paper. But I had to be polite.

"How'd she happen to start the boardinghouse?" I asked.

He smiled. "I fixed that. Her husband never has arrived and she had to do something. Come on. I'll take you there and introduce you."

He led me across the street and we climbed the hill.

The house was large and sheathed with shakes. It sat at the head of a small side canyon and overlooked the town.

"Gee," I said, for it was surprisingly big. "She must be rich to have a place like this."

Daniels laughed. "Crazy Lambert owns it. Crazy took it on a debt from a man named Borne. He had the house; Mrs. Foster had her furniture, shipped 'round the Horn. I introduced them and persuaded Lambert to rent her the house. Now we all have a comfortable place to live. It beats eating beans in a cabin."

SHE LOOKED like a little girl, standing in the shaft of afternoon sun at the door of the small entry hall, her back toward us. She glanced around as we came up, then turned back.

Tom Lambert stood facing her, his big, loose-jointed body relaxed, one elbow hooked around the newel post, his homely face twisted into a half grin.

I'd seen him stand this selfsame way a hundred times in my uncle's print shop while my uncle lectured him on the error of his ways.

And Crazy Tom Lambert was being lectured now, for Mary Lou Foster said, "I don't care if you do own this house. I'm renting it, and as long as I'm here you're not going to bring your fool burning gas into this place. The stuff is dangerous and there's enough chance of fire in these hills without you trying to kill us all."

She sounded angry, but Tom was not impressed. From one end of the country to the other people knew and liked him and called him Crazy. He had owned rich gold claims, but whenever he got money ahead he stopped mining and started to build things.

Once it had been a contraption to suck up the river bottoms and pick out the gold, then he had tried a steam sawmill. But burning gas—I pricked up my ears.

Daniels was amused. "What are you two quarreling about now?"

"I'm not quarreling," said Mary Lou. "I'm telling him. He wants to light up some building to interest people in his burning gas, and I simply won't have the

stuff in this house."

"Bravo!" said Daniels. "I've brought you a new customer. This is Austin Garner, my printer and editor. Give her your letter, boy."

I hadn't meant to mention the letter. I thought it was kind of sissy to have letters of introduction, but now I couldn't do anything else but place it in her hand. Then I turned to Lambert.

"Hi, Tom."

He gave me his crooked smile. "Hello, Austin. If this keeps up, every one in Sonora will move up to Squabble. How's your family?"

I said that they were all fine and Mary Lou smiled at me. "Your aunt pays a high compliment, putting you in my care. We'll try to make you happy, Austin. You seem to know Mr. Lambert already."

"Oh," I told her, "we're old friends. We made a steam printing press, only it didn't work."

"I'll venture it didn't." She threw a look of reproof at Tom.

"It will some day," he said. "We were pretty close, Austin. If that boiler—"

"Hadn't blown up." Daniels laughed. "You must hold the record for blowing things up, don't you, Tom?"

Lambert's eyes always looked a little sleepy, and his voice stayed even. "Almost, Max, almost."

"Well," said Mary Lou, "you men may not have anything to do, but I've got supper to think of. Come, Austin, I'll show you to your room."

I followed her up the stairs. There were three rooms on each side of the upper hall and a small one at the end. She led me into this and stopped. "It's not as big as the others, but you won't have to share it. Supper's at six, and I expect everyone to be prompt." She smiled then, and left me looking around.

WELL, I'D never seen anything like the supper table, white cloth and real silver. Mary Lou sat at the head of the table and asked the blessing, then she straightened and introduced me. There were eleven at the table, John and James Stark, a couple of Cornish miners, Peter Fry the blacksmith, Angelo Ferri who raised the camp's vegetables.

I memorized the names as Mary called them off. Bob Jefferson was the marshal, tall and cool-looking with hair the color of ripe wheat, Mr. Mortimer ran the New York Bookstore, and Colonel Sneed was a lawyer.

I took little part in the talk. The meal was served by the colored girl, Josie, small and tireless. She played her favorites by the size of the servings she gave out. Crazy Lambert's plate was heaped while Daniels had to ask for a second helping.

The conversation was general with some bickering which was hardly good-natured between Daniels and Sneed. I watched them. They were the opposing political leaders and anyone who had been raised in a mining camp print shop well knew the value of politics.

Naturally I would be for Daniels who was my employer, but I was impressed by Sneed's quiet grasp of things. After dinner I asked Crazy Lambert about them as I followed him down the rough path to the town below.

He shrugged. "I'll tell you one thing," he said. "You'll have to run the paper yourself. Max is a fine orator, but when it comes to running things, he's too busy."

I'd suspected as much. "But should he be elected to the senate?"

Tom shrugged again. "Sneed's probably the better man, but it doesn't seem to matter much. Our government goes right ahead running no matter who we send to Sacramento. But the only reason Daniels wants the paper started is to get himself elected. He'll forget about it as soon as the voting is finished."

I didn't like that. It was my first job. I changed the subject. "How are you coming?"

His tone warmed with enthusiasm. "I've got it, Austin. I've worked out a way to make burning gas by heating wood shavings in the presence of steam."

I shook my head. When I'd been

younger I'd believed in all of Tom's ideas, but now I wasn't sure and said so.

He grinned. "Wait until you see it work, then you'll be convinced."

"You should show Mary. She isn't convinced."

"She's a woman," he said wryly, "and sometimes women don't look at things like other people. She keeps telling me that I'm wasting my time, that I should work and save, but what have I got to save for? I haven't got a wife."

I glanced at him in the moonlight. I knew he was twenty-four. "It's too bad Mary Lou is married. She'd make you a good wife."

He laughed shortly. "Every man in camp has the same idea. If the Reverend Foster is wise, he'll stay in Oregon. Some of these miners might shoot him, just to make Mary a widow."

I was puzzled. "But why does she stay here? Why doesn't she go north and join him?"

"I don't know." Tom did not want to discuss the girl. "We wouldn't even know she was married if Daniels hadn't found out. Trust Max to learn everything about a pretty woman. If it weren't that he was running for office he'd probably try and get her to leave with him, husband or no."

"She wouldn't go anywhere with Max," I said quickly. "She's too good for him."

"She's too good for any of us," Tom halted before a small adobe building and opened the door. In the light of the whale oil lantern I had my first look at the gas machine.

THE WHOLE contraption could have been part of a nightmare. I had no idea how gas was distilled, but Tom explained that all wood and coal has gas imprisoned in its structure and that this gas can be released by roasting. But it is too dry, so steam is introduced to give it what he called a water content.

Above the oven was a bell-like top into which the gas rose from the oven and then fed out into a connecting pipe. He fired the boiler and we sat down to wait. I didn't expect much. I'd seen other notions of his fail, but when everything was hot he opened a jet at the end of the pipe and lighted it. The resulting flame shot out eight inches and I jumped back in surprise.

"You'd better jump," Mary Lou said from the doorway.

Tom frowned. "I've asked you not to walk around camp alone at night."

"Nonsense. The miners are my friends."

He ignored this. "If you have to go out there are plenty of men to escort you."

Her eyes flashed. "But I don't want an escort. I won't be bullied, Tom Lambert."

"You'll do as I say or I'll report you to Josie."

It struck me funny that he would threaten to report her to her servant, but surprisingly it worked. I learned later that Josie ruled the boardinghouse with a rod of iron.

Mary recognized defeat by changing the subject. "It's your business if you want to risk burning off all your hair as you did six months ago, but Austin's aunt placed him in my care and I certainly don't want to return a bunch of charred bones to her."

"There's no danger now," said Tom. "I didn't have my connections tight enough. Look at it burn."

It was burning all right, a long blue flame with a yellow tip. It gave a hundred times the light that came from the whale oil lantern.

I said, "Gee, it would be swell if you could make enough to light the whole town."

"That's the general idea," Tom told me.

"But how would you carry it around?"

"In wooden pipes, sections of logs, drilled and fastened together. You could carry it for miles."

I was thinking aloud. "But it would cost plenty."

His grin was rueful. "That's right, it would cost plenty, and the miners haven't much confidence in me."

"Why should they have?" Mary Lou still sounded angry. "You've wasted all your own money and months of time. Take warning from him, Austin, don't waste your life on unproductive dreams."

"Is that worse than wasting your time in Oregon with a lot of Indians while your wife keeps a miners' boarding-house?" The words popped out before I thought.

There was heavy silence in the small building, broken only by the hiss of the burning gas. Tom tried to save the situation by changing the subject.

"That press Daniels bought is in bad shape, Austin. I'll be glad to help you fix it tomorrow. Max can't. He never saw a press before in his life.

I looked at Tom uncertainly. I'd felt so big, starting out on my first job, and now, suddenly, I felt lost. My uncle was far away. I'd have to make the decisions for myself. I gulped, because I'd had a sudden idea.

"My uncle always said that what a newspaper needs is a cause to fight for. I'll fight for your gas, Tom. I'll prove to the camp that they should back you—so that Squabble can be the first town in the hills to be lighted by gas."

Lambert shook his head. "Better not. Max Daniels is starting that sheet to win the election. He won't take kindly to your backing me."

"I'm the editor," I boasted. "He'll let me run the paper the way I see fit. He'll have to. If he doesn't I'll go back to Sonora, and he can try and run the *Review* by himself.

II

I'D LEARNED my trade in a hard school. In the first year of my uncle's operation we had printed the *Sonora Tribune* on any type of paper which came to hand. In Squabble the situation was not much better. Tom Lambert and I worked a full day putting the old press into shape, then I got some paper on credit from the New York Bookstore and started out in search of both advertising and news.

I was too busy to worry, and although my first issue left much to be desired, I was proud of it. I'd found some woodcuts in a type drawer and used them to dress the front page although they bore no relation to the text. My news consisted of little more than personals, amplified with items borrowed from San Francisco and Eastern papers, but the gas was my big story, with a headline made of letters I cut from pine board.

I questioned merchants and gamblers along Gold, Canyon and Fremont streets, quoting their reactions to the possibility of lighting Squabble with burning gas. They gave their views freely and I wrote the lead, demanding light for Squabble, the fastest-growing camp in the hills.

It took four days to get the first issue

REALISTIC STORIES OF WESTERN LOVE AND ADVENTURE

in every issue of our

companion magazine

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS — ONLY 25c PER COPY!

together and the advertising response was disappointing, bringing in exactly twelve dollars less than the cost of the paper. But I meant to sell each copy for one dollar, that price being standard for first editions of newspapers, so I wasn't too worried.

The first copy printed I laid aside as a present for Mary Lou, then I finished my run of a hundred. The ink was smudgy, my carved head was lopsided, but the whole thing gave a fairly professional look and I went about cleaning up.

Max Daniels walked in. He'd been away on a trip to Sacramento, and this was his first glimpse of the *Review*.

He read it over carefully, a frown gathering about his handsome eyes. Then he looked up. "It's not long to election," he said sharply. "Have you forgotten that I'm running for office? There isn't one word about me in the paper."

I could think of nothing to say and he asked, "How many have you printed?"

"A hundred."

"Throw them away. I've been to Sacramento trying to get a toll bridge over the creek. Use that in place of the article about Tom Lambert's gas, and while we're on the subject, this paper doesn't support Lambert's crackpot ideas. I don't care if he is your friend."

I started getting angry. I told him that a good newspaperman doesn't write stories just because they're about some friend. I told him I couldn't print more copies because there was no more paper, and lastly I told him that if he thought I'd run the *Review* just to elect him to the senate, he'd better get another editor.

"This town needs street lights," I shouted, gathering the damp papers under my arm. But he blocked my passage.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Out to sell these," I panted. "I got the paper on loan. It's got to be paid for. If you stayed here and helped instead of traipsing around Sacramento, you could have passed on the stories before they went to type. Now get out of my way."

He stepped aside. I'm not sure what I'd have done if he hadn't.

I had no trouble selling my produce in the bars and stores, then I climbed the hill to the boarding house.

MARY READ the whole paper thoughtfully. "It's marvelous," she said when she finished. "I had no idea you could do so much without help, but I'm afraid Max won't like the gas story."

"He doesn't," I told her. "He's back and we had a fight." I was rather upset by now. I'm leaving, going back home."

"As bad as that?"

I nodded. "And he's all wrong. I was brought up to think a paper should serve a town, not be used to elect one man to office."

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't be in a hurry, Austin. When you're older you'll learn that there are ways and ways of doing things. If you could show Max that by supporting the gas it might elect him to office, he'd listen to you."

I looked at her, startled. "But I thought you didn't believe in the gas either."

"I don't know what I believe," she sounded tired. "So many of Tom's ideas haven't worked. Dreamers seldom get far. My father was one."

"But we saw the gas burn."

"Yes, it burns. Let me talk to Daniels. He's trying to promote a toll bridge to get votes. Maybe I can show him that the gas is a better idea. Now run out to the kitchen and have Josie give you some gingerbread."

I went out into the kitchen and found Josie setting out the gingerbread and muttering to herself. Apparently she'd been listening.

"That Daniels," she muttered. "Don't you listen, Austin. You tell them about Mr. Tom's gas machine."

"I'd like to," I said, "but—"

"Don't you worry, honey. Miss Mary Lou will help you. She's the helpingest human there ever was."

I looked at Josie. "You've known her a long time."

"I raised her," Josie said. "I guess I done knowed her always."

"What's her husband like?"

Her dark face lost its friendly smile. "Don't you go asking Josie family questions," she snorted. "Mary Lou, she tells what she wants you to know." She turned then and went quickly through the rear door, slamming it behind her.

After dinner Max asked me to walk down the hill with him. "I've been thinking about the gas idea," he said.

I glanced at him sharply, guessing that Mary Lou had been talking to him.

"How much would it cost to erect posts and put in the line for one street lamp, say?"

I didn't know.

He stopped, facing me squarely, and for once he was being entirely honest. "I'm going to be elected to the state senate," he said. "If backing the gas idea will get me votes, I'll back it, but if it should fail, the man who backs it will be defeated."

"I've seen it burn," I told him.

He nodded. "So have I. Austin, I have a star, a destiny. Who knows? There are greater goals than Sacramento."

I didn't know what to say. At seventeen, your perceptions are sometimes sharp, but I had not learned to meet a situation. I stood silent, embarrassed, while he went on. "I've sacrificed a lot to win this election. I'm giving up things that the average man lives for. I'll be frank because I don't want any more misunderstandings like we had this afternoon. I talked to Mrs. Foster. If she wasn't married, I'd marry her tonight."

I gave a muttered protest, but he ignored it. "Tonight she showed her first interest in my affairs."

Again I tried to speak, to explain that I thought Mary's interest was in the gas company, but he went on. "It would be so simple if she weren't married, but she is. I've have to take steps."

WELL, I HAD no idea what he meant. It worried me. It still worried me in the morning when I sought out Tom Lambert. He had set up a forge beside the gas house and was heating an iron rod. When it was cherry red he forced it into the end of a peeled log.

The smoke curled out of the blackened hole and not until it ceased to burn did he withdraw it and reheat the rod.

"Nice story in the paper about the gas," he said. "I suppose Max was sore."

I shook my head. "He's going to support your company."

Tom gave me a thoughtful look. "You change his mind?"

"I'd have liked to have claimed credit. "Mary did."

Tom shook his head slowly. "I wish she'd kept out of it. It might fail, and people respect her."

I said, "The trouble is that you're in love with her."

He didn't deny it. "She's married," he said, "and it's no help to a married woman having men pestering her."

I had the impulse to repeat Daniels' words, but I didn't. Instead I asked, "How much do you figure it will cost to lay pipe and set up a lamp in town, maybe on the corner before Brady's saloon?"

He considered. "I'll work on it. Some logs split when you burn out the center."

I stood for a couple of hours watching. Finally he burned through the log and I got down to peer at the hole. It was like looking down a dirty rifle barrel. "Will the gas go through that?"

He nodded and showed me how the log was hollowed out at one end and the next one trimmed down to fit into the hole. The joint had to be sealed so that the gas would not escape.

Impressed, I carried the information back to the shop and went to work on the story, even attempting a rough woodcut to explain the system of coupling.

THERE was this to say for Max Daniels. Once he embraced the idea he went to work. Inside of a week you would have supposed that it was his own original idea and that he'd merely permitted Tom Lambert to work out the details.

He appealed to the town's civic pride. He spoke of the glories of lighted streets and prophesied that people would come for miles to see the miracle. When the second issue of the *Review* was run, I printed two hundred copies which Daniels distributed personally.

The Squabble Gas and Light Company was formally organized exactly three weeks after the appearance of my first story, and the *Review* rode the crest of public interest. Our circulation was limited only by our ability to find paper.

Daniels was seldom in the office, and I hired a miner to help me. I was feeling very important, for the office had become a collection agency for the gas company and money rolled in as stock was sold.

Squabble was never as rich a camp as some, but the amount we collected was surprising. Still, costs were high and the wood shavings required for the distillation of the gas were difficult to prepare.

Tom Lambert was working day and night. Most of the time he slept at the gas house, too exhausted to climb the hill, and as the gas prospered, the election campaign grew in intensity.

Poor Colonel Sneed found himself in a difficult position. He was a friend of Lambert's and he believed that the streets should be lighted, but since Max Daniels now claimed most of the credit for the gas, its success would mean Daniels' certain election.

The colonel therefore counseled caution. He warned his audiences not to invest their full savings until extensive tests had been made.

Once many would have agreed with him, but now the idea had caught the popular fancy, and Daniels laughed at caution.

For myself, I learned that my first article had started something I could not control. I had a bear by the tail. Mary Lou spoke to me about it.

"You sound more like Max Daniels with every article you write. You're going to feel foolish if the gas doesn't work."

"I can't stop," I explained. "I've got to give the readers something new each issue or they won't buy the paper."

"Is selling papers so important, Austin?"

"Well—" I hesitated—"if we don't sell papers we don't sell advertising, and if we don't sell advertising, we make no money."

She nodded slowly. "It seems that everyone is driven by something. Max wants to be state senator, other men want to make money."

"Tom Lambert doesn't," I said. "He just wants to prove that his gas will work."

Her voice was tart. "From what I hear, Tom has nothing to do with it. Max Daniels acts as if the whole thing is his idea."

Tom had been standing in the open doorway, neither of us seeing him. "Credit isn't important," he said mildly.

She swung on him. "People have called you crazy for years. Now that you have the chance to prove them wrong, you let another man steal your idea."

He grinned his crooked grin. "Maybe it won't work."

"If it fails," she assured him, "Max will quickly transfer the blame to your shoulders." She turned and brushed past him into the house.

He winked at me. I said defensively, "Well, it *is* your idea and—"

"Austin," he told me, "some men are made to lead charges. Max is that type. He has to be out in front, and he's the kind that gets killed because he is out front. We need people like Max to keep us stirred up."

"Well—" I said doubtfully.

"Now take me," he went on. "I wasn't made to lead charges. I just sit around and think up ideas. But my ideas wouldn't get any place without people like Max to sell them."

I WASN'T sure I knew what he meant. Every day I stayed in Squabble I felt younger and younger. I wished my uncle was there to tell me what to do.

If the gas failed I was actually more responsible to the investors than anyone.

If I hadn't written the first story in the paper there would probably never have been a gas company, and Tom and Max, and for that matter Mary Lou, wouldn't have been mixed up with a lot of investors.

Those stockholders who lacked cash were giving labor in return for shares. The plant had been enlarged with a boiler which had once graced a steamboat on the Sacramento before the boat struck a snag and sank in shallow water.

It was quite an achievement to get the boiler up over the trail, taking four of Reynolds' best teams to haul it across the stiff grade.

The day the boiler arrived the whole town turned out and the miners from the gulches came in to watch the triumphant progress along Fremont.

Max Daniels, who never missed an opportunity, met the procession at the west end of town, crawled to a precarious perch upon the boiler's rounded top and holding his stovepipe hat high in his right hand, bowed and waved to the cheering crowd which thronged the broad sidewalks.

Mary Lou was with me in the print shop. She walked to the door, clutching her shawl against the cold sweep of the canyon down draft.

"Look at that, Austin. There's something to remember."

It was more thrilling than any parade I'd ever seen. As the boiler passed, the miners thronged into the dust of the road forming ranks, marching, yelling, singing.

"Where's Tom?"

She pointed wordlessly to the right and I saw Lambert standing with his back against the hotel gallery's post, his tired face relaxed but unsmiling. He had sweated the boiler safely up the grade and now that it was on the level he had withdrawn.

"Look at him," said Mary. "Can you wonder he'll never amount to anything?"

She brushed past me and picked her way behind the crowd to where Lambert stood. "Why aren't you on the wagon?"

He turned, giving her his half smile. "I'm not needed. They're doing well enough."

She lost her temper. "Who found that boiler? Who raised it from the river when men said it wasn't possible? Who hauled it up here?"

"Why, I did."

"You did, and who's riding on it now? Who will ride it right into the state senate?"

His tone was still quiet, a little chiding. "But I don't want to go to the state senate."

"What do you want?" I could hear her small toe tapping the wooden sidewalk.

"Well, now." He sounded a little startled. "That's a hard question to answer. A man's wants are complex. It's a question of degree. I want supper tonight and breakfast tomorrow—"

"You!" she said, and she sounded as if she were going to cry.

"And I want this town to be lighted by gas. I want a comfortable bed. Who knows what I want? Wants change with conditions. Few men know what they really want."

"Max does!" She threw the words at him. "Max Daniels knows what he wants and he'll get it!"

"Perhaps."

"Look at him." She raised her voice and pointed.

Daniels was worth looking at, standing on the boiler as if he were a conqueror standing on the world.

"That's the way a man should act," she said, and her voice broke a little. "Max believes in his destiny. He isn't afraid to follow his star. He may slip on the path, but he'll reach the top. He'll be happy."

"I wonder," said Tom Lambert. "Happiness isn't quite that easily achieved. Happiness is something to be earned, something you sacrifice for, something—"

"You!" she said again. And then she turned and hurried off blindly through the crowd. I stared after her. When I turned to speak to Tom he had vanished into the hotel.

SLOWLY I went back to the shop. The smell of ink was familiar and reassuring. I needed that reassurance for I was weighted by a premonition of impending trouble that I had failed to lose when I climbed the darkened path to the boardinghouse.

I'd eaten downtown since I had had to work late on some handbills, and when I heard Daniels' voice my first reaction was anger.

I had asked him to stay at the shop that evening and help, but he had begged off because of a promised speech to a bunch of miners at the head of Half-Dead Gulch.

But he was not at Half-Dead Gulch. He was ahead of me, talking to someone in the darkness. It wasn't the first time he had failed to help when I asked him, and I opened my mouth intending to call to him and tell him exactly how I felt.

Then I heard Mary Lou say, "I shouldn't have come down here, Captain." Something in her tone made me pause.

"We're very formal." He sounded bitter. "You've led me on for weeks."

"Captain Daniels—"

"Max," he said. "You've called me Max for months."

"I certainly haven't led you on."

His voice changed then, and became pleading. "Damn it, Mary, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You've done nothing wrong. But by merely being yourself you drive a man crazy. I can't stand it any longer. I want you to divorce your husband."

"Max!"

"I mean it. We can't go on this way, and any man who would leave you alone in a mountain mining camp isn't worth considering. He sent you here and—"

"No one sent me here. I came because a miner told me that Squabble was the fastest-growing town in the hills. I'll admit I was shocked and scared at first, but everyone has been so kind—"

"Why shouldn't they be kind? Every man here is in love with you including that Garner kid. He spends half his time making calf eyes."

"Is that why you want to get a divorce, Max, because you love me yourself?"

He sounded irritated. "Of course. I want to marry you."

"But Max," she sounded like a puzzled girl, "nice people don't get divorces, and a man in politics simply can't afford to be mixed up with a divorced woman."

He told her sharply, "No one will know. We won't be married until after I'm elected, and by the time the next election rolls around three-quarters of the miners will have moved on. In this country, population changes constantly."

"I see." Her tone had a curious note. "I was afraid for a moment that you meant to give up your career in order to marry me."

He was startled. "I'm not so foolish as that. You don't have to worry. A man can't take his eye from the main chance no matter how he feels. You can get a quiet divorce and we'll be married in four or five months."

"I'll have to think. It—it's so new. I've always felt safe with you, Max. I knew you had your eye on the main chance. I didn't think you'd do anything to risk your future. Other men were difficult. Some even were willing to throw up everything to run away with me."

He was suddenly jealous. "Who would do a fool thing like that? You'd be ostracized for the rest of your life. I know, it was Crazy Lambert. He's never had the least bit of sense."

"No," she said. "You're wrong Max. It wasn't Tom Lambert. Tom is about the only man in this camp who hasn't mentioned love to me. He's too busy with his gas machine."

Daniels laughed, his good humor restored. "Good old Lambert. His gas will send us to Sacramento, and probably Washington. Don't think I don't appreciate Tom Lambert."

"I know you do," she said. "I think you appreciate him more than he does himself."

LONG AFTER they had returned to the house I remained there, too stunned to move. The thought that any

decent woman would consider divorce was beyond me. Actresses and such got them, I had heard, but a minister's wife—Mary Lou! It was too incredible to believe. I wanted to turn away and run down the hill.

I debated telling Lambert, but there were certain things which a man simply could not discuss. And besides, Tom was too near accomplishing his dream to think of anything else. His mind had room only for his work.

He was as full of plans as he had been when we worked on the ill-fated steam press three years before.

"We're all set. Nothing can stop us. I've got the pipe so that the joints don't leak. The new boiler will give us five times as much steam. It's all due to you. Before you ran that story in the paper no one was interested."

I was trying to be fair. "It was Max Daniels really."

He dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "Max will be well repaid for what he did. He'll go to the senate. That's all he wants."

I coughed. Max wanted Mary Lou too, but I didn't tell Tom. Instead I turned toward the shop.

There was plenty to do. For the next two weeks none of us had much time for thought. Three hundred men were busy laying the line down one side of Fremont Street and the whole town was feverish with excitement.

Saturday night had been set for the official lighting of the single street lamp, erected at the main intersection, and it was none too soon as far as Daniels was concerned, for the election was the following Tuesday.

Max had a wagonload of paper hauled from Sacramento and I got out a special edition. He also hired a dozen riders to circulate every camp in the district with free copies of the issue.

Squabble took on a gala air. It was more exciting than Fourth of July, and I found I was as jittery as anyone. The festivities opened with a huge torchlight procession, led by Krummer's Silver Cornet Band, which started at the head of the gulch and wound downward in slow-marching ranks.

Behind the band rode Daniels, sitting his horse with the ease of a vaquero, and behind him came the Squabble Blues, magnificent in their silver-faced uniforms, then the fire department, dragging its pumper.

They marched between sidewalks crowded with men, for the miners had gathered from as far away as Johnson's Flat and Whisky Ridge. There were nearly ten thousand people in Squabble that night. It was the high point of the camp, the crest which never again was reached.

I LOOKED for Tom Lambert in the procession, but he was down at the corner, putting the finishing touches on the lamp. It was a cedar post, standing eight feet high with a glass shield resembling a ship's lantern at the top.

The post had been carefully turned and painted, its center hollowed so that the gas could rise from the pipe to the jet inside the glass shade.

Other lamps were planned for every corner along the full length of Fremont, after which it was intended to equip the larger saloons and gambling halls. There was some loose talk that private homes might one day afford such luxury, but no one could really believe it.

The procession advanced, the marchers' feet bringing up clouds from the heavy dust. Their faces showed red and

sweat-streaked in the light from the flaming, pine-knot torches.

Finally the speaker's stand was reached. It had been built beside the new lamp and its sides were decorated with signs and streamers, such as:

SEND DANIELS TO THE STATE SENATE
HE BROUHT LIGHT TO US, HE'LL BRING
LIGHT TO THE LEGISLATURE.

I saw Colonel Sneed on the sidewalk. His long face was expressionless, but I knew that he was too smart a man to entertain any hope of beating Daniels.

Mary Lou stood with me in the print shop doorway. She and Josie had come down early to avoid the crowd, and they would leave by the back door once the speaking was finished, for the streets of Squabble would be no place for women that night.

Max Daniels had dismounted and taken his place on the platform along with Bob Jefferson, the mayor and the head of the fire department. The band was grouped near the stand. They played *America* and *Hangtown Girls* and *Suzanna.*

Next the mayor introduced Daniels, as if everyone did not know the captain by his first name.

Tom had disappeared and Mary was looking for him. "He should be on the platform," she whispered.

I didn't answer, for Daniels had begun to speak.

"Fellow citizens—" his voice had its old hypnotic effect—"we are gathered together this evening to mark one of the greatest events in the progress of human history. I am not going to make a political speech—"

There were scattered laughs from the crowd and several shouts. "You tell them, Captain. . . . We're with you Max!"

He raised his hands for quiet, then continued. "Seriously, this is a great event. Men have marked their progress through the ages by great accomplishments—the discovery of fire, the discovery of the wheel, the signing of the Magna Carta, Columbus' voyage which opened up this western world, the founding of our country, the admission of California as a state—" He was forced to pause while the miners shouted their approval and the band began to play.

When he had quiet restored he went on, his tone lower, as if he was awed by the moment in which he found himself. "But honestly, my friends, I feel that we stand on the threshold of a new era. Man has feared and hated darkness since the beginning of time. He has striven for generations to push back night, to turn it into day.

"In the East, in the great cities, they have experimented with gas, made by roasting coal, but in this land we have no coal. Therefore, it has fallen to Squabble, the most progressive community of this great new state, to pioneer in the fight against darkness. And I feel humble, for I have been chosen to apply the torch, to light the everlasting flame which will forever mark this community as the most progressive in the hills!"

He turned, taking a folded piece of paper from the mayor's hand, held it to a blazing torch, then thrust it into the gas lamp. The gas flame shot up a good six inches inside the globe, and the crowd went wild. Light had come to the hills.

IV

TOM LAMBERT was near exhaustion. His face was drawn and smudged with dirt. He came slowly up the hill and mounted to the porch where Mary Lou and I still stood, looking out across the town. Below us, the shouts of celebrating men filled the canyon with sound which would continue until morning.

Despite his obvious exhaustion, Tom looked pleased. He gave us each a small grin and leaned wearily against the rail.

"Well, it's done."

Mary said tartly, "I didn't see you on the speaker's platform. I didn't see you taking any bows."

He shrugged. "Someone had to be at the works to be certain the machine operated properly. Anyone can hold a piece

of lighted paper and listen to men cheer."

"And everyone in the state will be talking about Max Daniels, the man who made the burning gas. No one will mention Tom Lambert. Haven't you any pride?"

He stared at her thoughtfully, then turned and disappeared into the house.

Mary was almost in tears. "He's worked so hard, and to take no credit—what can you do with a man like that?"

I spoke brutally, for I had not forgotten her conversation with Daniels. "What difference does it make to you?"

She started, then sounded angry. "Why, none to me, you may be sure, but it will matter to some woman one day. Women like to be proud of their men. They don't want them laughed at. They don't want them called crazy. A man may be very smart, but he must blow his own horn to be appreciated."

"Like Max Daniels?"

"You blame Max for taking the credit for Tom's gas?"

"Don't you?"

"I did once—" she sounded puzzled—"but now I'm not so sure. I'm all mixed up, Austin, all mixed up." She left me alone in the darkness.

I was all mixed up too. My conceptions of right and wrong had taken a terrific beating in the last few days.

The gas flame burned all the following day. It was a beacon around which men gathered, and curious crowds flocked out to see the machine from which the gas came. Lambert was there, explaining the operation, and Daniels was present, accepting the adoration of the crowd.

Tom gave no sign of resenting Max's presence. He was busy working on plans for the installation of the next lamp, and he paid little attention to Daniels' words. After an hour I left for the print shop. There was type to break up in preparation for the election extra which I hoped to have on the street by Wednesday morning.

MONDAY passed quietly enough. The light still burned, since Daniels had requested that the gas not be turned off until after the voting.

I went to the boardinghouse for dinner Monday evening, but came back down the hill afterward to finish my work.

I'd set the two inside pages with personals, the first page being held for the election returns.

About ten o'clock I heard noise in the street and stepped out to see a small crowd gathered around the light standard. At first I did not understand what had caused the excitement, but as I reached the fringe of the crowd, I saw that they were pointing upward toward the globe and I heard someone shout, "I tell you that flame is getting shorter!"

I looked at the jet and saw that the flame was only about half as high as it had been. My first thought was that the log pipeline had sprung a leak at one of the connections, and I turned toward the gas works, knowing that Tom must be told at once.

But others were before me. There was a crowd about the entrance and sounds of argument from inside. I pushed my way in and saw Tom facing Max Daniels, the mayor and several company officials.

As I entered I heard Max say, "But I tell you, something has to be done tonight. Half the men in this camp have invested their dust in this light. If it fails—" He didn't finish the sentence, but everyone knew what he meant.

The miners were the most generous people in the world, but if they got the idea that they had been fooled, they would not only fail to elect Daniels to the senate, they might even string him up to the very lamp post which he had lighted only two nights before.

"I don't know what's the matter," Tom said. "If it were a leak the gas would continue to flow from the machine. As it is, it's backing up in the bell as if there were some obstruction in the pipe."

"Then let's dig it up." Max Daniels had never before showed any love for physical labor, but he grabbed a shovel now from a pile in the corner, and with-

out a word the other men followed him.

There was plenty of help. Every man in camp had drifted down to watch and the excitement grew. The dirt was still loose and the volunteer workers made it fly. Within two hours the line had been uncovered for the full length of Fremont Street. Then Tom stepped down into the ditch and, with the help of a dozen men, broke one of the joints and raised a cedar length.

From its end oozed a black tar-like substance which stained his hands and almost filled the hole burned through the log.

Tom stood for a long moment, staring at his gummy fingers, then slowly stepped from the ditch.

Two hundred men watched him wordlessly until I asked, "What is it?"

"Wood tar," he said. "Rosin from the pine shavings we've been using."

"But—"

He looked at me. His voice sounded very tired. "There isn't any but, Austin. I should have foreseen what would happen. I knew there was tar residue formed when gas was made, but I didn't realize that enough of it would be carried by the gas to block the pipes."

Max Daniels was staring at Lambert as if the world had fallen from under his feet. "You mean that the lighting won't work, that the whole thing is a failure?"

"It seems to be," said Tom, "unless we can devise some way to filter it from the gas before the gas reaches the pipes."

"And how long will that take?"

Lambert shrugged. "Who knows? A week, a month, perhaps never."

ANGRY murmurs were rising from the crowd. Everyone who held stock had expected the investment to make him rich. Disappointment rode them, angering them. Already their minds were searching for someone to blame.

Max Daniels, with a politician's fine perception, sensed this quickly. He turned, intent on placing the blame squarely on Tom's shoulders. "You should have warned us of this possibility."

"I didn't foresee it." Tom knew what was in Daniels' mind.

"You should have."

A man at the back of the crowd yelled, "It was your newspaper stories that promoted the gas."

"I was misled." Max Daniels was getting desperate. Everything he had so carefully built up was slipping away. He had to hold the crowd to form a solid front with them against Lambert, or everything was lost.

"You were misled?" A bulky miner, bearded and immense, pushed in front of Max. "You're easily misled. You aren't as smart as we thought, or maybe, you're much smarter."

Max flushed. "What do you mean by that?"

The miner faced the crowd.

"How do we know where the money went? How do we know some of it isn't in Daniels' pockets? He's a politician, and politicians are crooked."

"Wait." Tom Lambert had stepped forward. "Every dollar was spent as it should have been, that I will assure you."

The man turned to Tom. "How do we know you two weren't in this together?" He thrust his bushy face close to Lambert's. "I say you're both crooks. I say we should string you up. Tar and feathers are too good for you."

Tom Lambert lost his temper. All the weary hours, all the bitterness of failure went into the blow. He struck and there was unsuspected power in his wiry body, for the miner went down and did not move.

But it was the wrong thing to do. The crowd surged forward threateningly with shouts of, "Hang him. Hang the crooks to their own lamp pole."

They seized Lambert, and Daniels was forgotten as he vanished quickly in the darkness. It was Colonel Sneed who saved Tom's neck. He made a speech, sharp and clear.

"You men are fools," he shouted. "You let Daniels talk you into rushing the gas business so that it would be completed before election."

Someone laughed. "Daniels couldn't

be elected to anything. We'll vote for you, Colonel. Those blocked pipes will send you to the senate. Certain you didn't fill them with tar?"

A laugh surged through the crowd. Sneed caught the change in mood. "It would have been an idea," he said. "Sorry I wasn't smart enough. But I'm not quick-witted like Daniels."

"You're honest," someone called. "That's what we need, an honest man."

"Thank you, Joe Ferth," Sneed singled out the speaker. "And I'm smart enough to know that Tom Lambert is the only man in camp who knows enough about the gas to perhaps salvage the company. Hang him, and you lose your full investment. Believe me, you'll regret your action tomorrow."

They hesitated, and Sneed was quick to seize the advantage. "If you think him guilty, have the marshal lock him up. Tomorrow we'll all be cooler-headed. We can try him then. If you want to hang him tomorrow, I'll help you."

They wavered, and Bob Jefferson wasted no time. He took Lambert's arm and rushed him through the crowd. I turned and raced away. I wanted to tell Mary Lou. But I had no chance to tell her for Daniels was there before me, talking heatedly.

"I'm all through here," he said. "I might have known that anything Crazy Lambert touched would be a failure. It's your fault, Mary, that I got involved. You talked me into furthering the silly business."

She didn't answer and he went on quickly, "I'm pulling out tonight. I'm headed for the northern camps. I've lost the election here, but there will be another somewhere else. And you're coming with me. We can't wait for your divorce."

I opened my mouth to tell her not to forget her marriage, not to ruin her life, but all I managed was a kind of squeak. They both turned.

"Austin!" Mary seized both my hands. "Where's Tom?"

"In jail. They're going to try him in the morning."

Daniels said quickly, "Come on, Mary. I won't go alone. If you don't go with me, I'll stay and fight. I can handle these miners when they cool off. I'll put the full blame on Lambert."

She turned and looked at him. By her face I knew she was struggling for a decision. "I'll go," she said suddenly. "I'll go, but I want to talk to Austin alone."

Daniels was suspicious. "All right," he said grudgingly. "But hurry. I'll get horses and pick you up. We haven't much time."

WHEN I was alone with her I said quickly, "You can't do it, Mary. You can't run away with him."

"I've got to. He won't go unless I go with him, and if he stays, he'll twist things so that Tom will get the full blame. But if he runs away, the miners will think him at fault. They always blame the one who runs. You're the newspaper editor. You'll have to sway public opinion in Tom's favor."

"I—"

"You've got to." She stooped and kissed me full on the lips, and I felt her tremble. Then she ran into the rear of the house, and I was alone in the parlor, terribly unhappy and not caring who knew it.

Josie slipped in. She took one look at my face and gathered me to her. "Lordy, Mr. Austin whatever is the matter?"

I told her in short jerky sentences. I poured the full story into her ear. "We can't let her go, Josie. It will ruin her, a married lady."

Josie held me away from her. She said, "You stop fretting. Miss Mary, she knows what she has to do, and as for her being married—well, it just ain't so."

I stared. "Not married! But the Reverend Luther Foster?"

"Her father, God rest him. He come out to San Francisco, and he died there."

"But she told them—"

"She never said she was married. That

Max Daniels said it. He jumps at things. He read the lettering on our boxes, and he concludes she's a married lady. Miss Mary let it go. A married lady is safer with all these men about."

"Then there's no reason she shouldn't go with Daniels?"

"None, lessen you count her being fond of someone else a reason. She's going to save Mr. Tom, and I ain't certain he would wish to be saved that way."

I wasn't certain either. There was only one way to find out. I ran down the hill. Never afterward could I understand how I managed without breaking my neck.

The crowd had dispersed to the saloons, and I found the marshal and Colonel Sneed alone in the jail office.

"I've got to see Tom," I shouted and ran on down the corridor to the single cell.

He was sitting on the bunk and did not look up until I called, "Mary Lou's running away with Daniels."

He jumped then and came over to the bars. "You're crazy."

"I'm not. She's doing it for you. She figures that if Max leaves town the miners will blame him for the gas failures and turn you loose."

"She can't do that. She's married!"

"She's not. She's not." I repeated what Josie had told me.

His face had gone white. "And you're certain she's doing this for me?"

"She told me herself." I repeated her words.

"I've got to get out of here, Austin, quick."

I called the marshal. Bob Jefferson was a friend of Tom's, but his face was stony as he listened. "I can't turn you loose," he told Lambert. "You know I can't."

"I'll come back," Tom promised. "I give you my word I'll be back before morning."

"I'll stay," I said. "I'll be a hostage. If he doesn't come back they can hang me." I said this last with a kind of gulp. The miners would be very sore if they found Lambert gone. They might hang the hostage at that, or anyone else responsible for his escape.

Colonel Sneed added his voice to mine, and Jefferson looked at us in despair. Finally he threw up his hands. "What can a man do?" He produced the big key and opened the door. "All of you get out."

I PANTED at Tom's side as we climbed the hill. We were heading for the back trail, knowing that Daniels would not dare come through town.

It seemed a long time that we waited. I began to fear that we had missed them, then I heard horses on the trail above, picking their way carefully through the gloom.

"That's far enough," Tom said suddenly.

I heard Daniels swear. "Lambert, what are you doing here?"

"I've come to stop you."

"You're crazy."

"People have been telling me so for years."

Mary Lou had urged her horse forward. "Tom, get out of the way. You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly. You think by having Max run away that I won't be blamed for the gas failure. Don't do it, Mary. It isn't necessary."

"It is!" She was crying.

"No," said Lambert. "A man needs to fight his own battles. I'll tell them in the morning that the failure was my error, that I led Daniels on."

"You wouldn't!"

"I swear it. I'll hide behind no woman's skirts. Get off that horse and go back where you belong. I need you. I want you. What good would it be for me to go free if you were gone?"

"But—but I'm married." It was the first time I'd heard her tell the lie directly, and my mouth opened to protest, but Tom said sharply, "Then we'll live in sin. Are you going back or must I carry you?"

I heard the girl gasp, then she said faintly, "I—I guess I'd better go back."

Daniels had been struck dumb by

surprise. He found his voice now.

"Wait," he shouted. "I'll go back too. I'll fight Lambert before a miners' court. I'll let them decide I've done nothing wrong. I'm ready to face the court and let them hear the truth."

"No," said Tom, "you'd better not go back. Maybe the miners won't hang you, but I will. I don't like men who try to steal my girl." He stepped forward threateningly.

Daniels reined his horse away. For an instant I thought he would dismount, that we'd have a fight there on the trail. Then suddenly Max drove home his spurs and was gone, clattering along the trail.

"Go to the house," Tom told Mary. "I've got to be ready to greet my lynchers."

"Tom!"

"Don't worry." He took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

She had no time to argue. We watched her mount and ride away, then we cut back across the hills. Tom was whistling as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"You should have told her," I said.

He paused to look at me. "Told her what?"

"That you knew she wasn't married."

He caught my arm. "Listen, Austin, to your dying day, never admit that I knew she wasn't married!"

"But you said you'd live in sin."

I could see his eyes twinkle in the early morning light. "Women are complex," he told me. "One side of their nature wants to be put on a pedestal and worshipped like a goddess, but the other side wants a man to love so strongly that he would break any convention to prove his love."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Who ever told you women make sense?" He walked on, whistling again.

I said, "I wouldn't be too happy if I were you. Those miners are still angry. They could well hang you."

He grinned. "I don't think so. They'll find out soon enough that I'm going to be married. You'd never get a crowd of miners to hang a prospective bridegroom. Bridegrooms are too uncommon in these hills, and people would rather go to a wedding than a hanging any day."

Twelve Great Magazines of the West!

THRILLING WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
TEXAS RANGERS
TRIPLE WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN

TEXAS WESTERN
POPULAR WESTERN
GIANT WESTERN
THE RIO KID WESTERN
WEST MAGAZINE
FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS!

"Your warning comes a bit late," he said

COULD THERE EVER BE HAPPINESS for Clem Sadler, when he loved the daughter of . . .

His Best Enemy

By Ennen Reaves Hall

CLEM SADLER'S horse shied so suddenly that he almost lost his seat. It took a couple of moments to quiet the snorting animal and see what had excited it so. He'd been following a path along the river. On that side the land sloped gently away from the stream, but the opposite side was different. There the bank rose in a perpendicular wall nearly thirty feet high. At the bottom of that bluff, half clogging the small stream, was a great heap of what looked like

Copyright, 1947, by Warner Publications, Inc., and originally published in First March, 1947, Ranch Romances

some very old and dirty gray rags.

Clem didn't have to look twice to know what that heap was. It was sheep—his sheep—and very, very dead. Perhaps a couple of hundred. Maybe even more. That pile of rags, roughly speaking, was around twenty-five hundred dollars.

Clem swore loudly, using all the terms familiar to a sheep grower and adding a lot he'd learned in the South Pacific. Then he egged his horse into high speed, heading for the herder's camp a half-mile away. And while he rode Clem was busy thinking up ways of skinning an Indian sheepherder and hanging his hide up to dry.

The band of sheep, held in the north quarter of his section of summer range, were badly scattered, Clem saw. The ones that hadn't gone over the bluff were huddled in small groups here and there, clearly indicating the state of confusion they were still in. Something had panicked them badly during the night. Clem's anger was like a fiery furnace inside him as he drew rein in front of the herder's tent and threw himself from the saddle.

"John!" he was yelling. "What the hell you mean letting those sheep—"

He stopped at the sight of the Indian stretched out on his cot, snoring lustily. Beside him lay two emptied whisky bottles.

Calling himself a few choice names for allowing this to happen, Clem picked up one of the empty fifths and looked at it. Canadian Club! Rather high-priced stuff for an Indian sheepherder not accustomed to being choosy about his hootch. And John hadn't been off the place for weeks. Where would he get bonded liquor like that?

Clem's first thought was whisky peddlers among the Utes, but at once his common sense told him better. No peddler would offer the Indians Canadian Club when they could stick them just as much for a cheaper brand. Besides, the way those sheep were scattered told a story in itself. Somebody had evidently brought John the whisky as a gift so that he would be too drunk to interfere when they stampeded the sheep.

But why? That was the question hammering at Clem. And why had that big truck run right through his band last week, killing and crippling nearly fifty? They'd been moving both bands to this summer grazing range and had had to travel for a short distance along the highway. But John and Pedro, Mexican herder for the other band, and a half-dozen of Pedro's kids, had been yelling and clattering tin cans until the bedlam must have been heard for miles. Yet here had come this big two-decker truck around a curve at ninety to nothing and crashed right into the band without warning. And why?

Clem had thought then the whole thing smacked of deliberateness. Now, holding this empty bottle in his hand and remembering that pile of dirty wool, he was sure of it. But he was completely at a loss to account for such vandalism.

OF COURSE, he reminded himself, he'd been gone three years and was out of touch with things here in southwestern Colorado. If his father had lived—But the telegram telling about Joe Sadler's death had been waiting for Clem when he docked in San Francisco. And in this remote corner of Colorado this sheep ranch had waited, too. So Clem had gotten his discharge through fast, and hurried home to take over.

Immediately things had started breaking badly for him. The herders had quit without explanation, leaving only Pedro and this worthless John to handle thirty-five hundred sheep. Then the registered ram that Clem knew had cost his father nearly a year's profits, had died under mysterious circumstances. Other losses had followed, including the truck accident. And now this.

Somebody, he decided, was out to get him. All these things couldn't be laid to chance. His mind leaped at once to Iler Higbee, a neighboring wool grower, whom Clem didn't trust.

Higbee had been his father's personal enemy. And his only one, so far as Clem knew. The two men had hated each

other ever since Clem could remember and would go to almost any lengths to vent their ill feeling for each other. And he was sure that truck last week had belonged to Higbee, even though he wasn't driving it. Though this was carrying spite work pretty far, the things that had been happening to Clem were just what he might expect from a man of Higbee's caliber.

For Clem was remembering a night three years ago when he'd waited with a marriage license for Higbee's young daughter, Janet. Iler had come in her place that night, and he'd bluntly told a stunned boy that no daughter of his was marrying a Sadler. She had been sent East to school and ordered to forget Clem Sadler.

But Clem hadn't forgotten. He'd hated Higbee as intensely as his father did ever since, and Iler Higbee must know it. The father was probably trying to ruin the son, now that the father he'd hated so was dead. . . .

An hour later, Clem found more reason for connecting Higbee with the things that had been happening to him. After arousing the herder and learning nothing from him except that some friends had brought him the liquor, then left, Clem rode back to his house.

Passing his mailbox he stopped to look inside. Just habit, for no one ever wrote to him. To his surprise Clem had a letter, an official-looking envelope from the Taylor Grazing Service office in Salt Lake City. He was filled with a foreboding of trouble as he slit the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of paper.

And trouble it was! The typed words swam crazily before his eyes. "The complaint has reached this office that your grazing permit granted under the Taylor Grazing Act is not commensurable with your base property and stock. . . Mr. Morgan, our local grazier in your district, has been asked to inspect your sheep and make his recommendations as to whether your lease should be corrected. . . ."

So that was it. Clem saw the whole picture now. Iler Higbee wanted that section of mountain land for his own summer range. He'd always coveted it because of the river and the water holes. It was probably the most desirable of all the public lands in the San Juan basin, and Clem's father had held it only because of his priority rating. He'd been using it when the Taylor Act, allocating certain public lands among the wool growers, became a law, and so had been able to keep it in spite of Iler Higbee.

Now that Joe Sadler was dead, Higbee was renewing his efforts to get the range. He had very likely filed that complaint with the Taylor Board, claiming Clem wasn't running as many sheep as the range would support, and then had set about to make his claims true by eliminating as many as possible of Clem's sheep.

What a dirty trick to play on a man! He'd be double damned if Iler Higbee was going to get away with that. Clem started in a lope for the Higbee ranch house a couple of miles away, hot anger and burning hatred boiling up in him to the exploding point. He'd settle this right now, he vowed. If Higbee wanted a fight over the range, let him bring it out into the open. Clem hated a sniper passionately.

NOT UNTIL he stood at the Higbee front door, listening to the sound of a piano inside, did the thought occur to Clem that Janet might be home. He'd tried keeping her out of his thoughts as much as possible, assuming a girl with her looks would be married by now. What was it his father had written once, not knowing how deep he was cutting Clem? "Got a new grower on the Piedra. An Eastern dude named Bond Merrill that I think is working for a syndicate and don't know a sheep from a billy goat. But he's shining up to Higbee's gal and that damn fool Iler is pleased as Punch."

In answer to Clem's knock the piano playing stopped and heels came tapping lightly along the hall. Clem had to stifle a foolish desire to cut and run. He didn't in the least want to see Janet, married

or otherwise. He was desperately afraid his heart would start pounding as it used to do at sight of her.

But what the hell ailed him? All that was three years ago. He'd been a damn fool kid then, just past twenty, who hadn't been out of the Rock Mountain country a half-dozen times in his life. Since then he'd been around the world, helped win a war and now was a wool grower in his own. Things would be different now, he thought.

Then the door opened and Janet stood there. And she looked exactly as Clem remembered her — tawny yellow hair falling to her shoulders like a veil of spun silk, a little heart-shaped face and big amber-colored eyes just a shade darker than her hair. And the look in those eyes was doing exactly the same thing to Clem it had always done, and always would do whenever he saw her.

Janet spoke first, a little breathlessly. "Clem, I'm so glad you came. I've been wondering why you didn't—"

Clem wanted to laugh at that. Anger came back to loosen his tongue and he felt a surge of fierce triumph at the thought that this girl no longer had the power to enslave him. He was free and he'd stay free.

"Had you thought of any reasons why I should come?" he asked harshly. "I'm just here now for a showdown with Iler."

He thought the amber eyes reflected disappointment. "Dad's not here," she said slowly. "Oh, Clem! Are you going to drag out that senseless feud? I was in hopes it would die with your f—I mean, I'm sorry about your father, of course. But I did hope—"

She floundered hopelessly, and Clem took up where she left off, "That I'd be less of a man than Dad and take any dirty deals Iler Higbee wanted to hand out? Well, you're wrong, Janet. He's not going to get my range and you can tell him I said so. I'll see him in hell first."

Tears filled her eyes, making them sparkle like sun shining on dew. "Clem, don't be like that," she fairly begged. "Dad doesn't want your range. I don't believe he even wants to keep up this silly fighting."

"No? Then why did he order his truck to run through my drive last week, killing around fifty sheep? And why did he send whisky over to my Indian herder last night so he'd be too drunk to interfere when your father went in and scattered the band and ran several hundred over the river bluff?

JANET stepped back, her face white with horror. "Clem," she gasped, "you must be crazy! Dad hasn't done such things. He couldn't."

Her distress stirred no pity in Clem. He went on mercilessly. "Maybe you'd better ride over to the river bluff on my summer range and take a look. The sheep are still piled up there, half as high as this house. It's not a pretty sight, Janet. And it makes me want to laugh at your glib talk about being friends now that poor Dad's gone. The fight's against me, to get my grazing permit away from me, and you can put it down in your little book that I'm not taking it sitting down."

He swung on his heels then and started down the steps. Janet called after him, but he didn't stop. He had suddenly realized he was about to reach the end of his self-control. Any minute he might break and let her see she still held her old power over him. A man couldn't stomach that. Then she ran after him and put her hand on his arm, and Clem had to stop because his knees got weak as water.

"Clem, please," Janet begged, still in that oddly breathless voice, "don't be bitter with me like this. I tell you, Dad didn't have anything to do with those terrible things. And even if he did, why should that stop you and I from being friends? It didn't once."

She'd said the wrong thing. All the old hurt was back, lashing furiously at Clem, making him want to hurt her in return. Had she so completely forgotten, or was she just trying to make a monkey out of him? Well, she couldn't do it.

"That's a laugh, Janet," he said, al-

most easily. "Seems to me it did stop us. I have some vague recollection of waiting around with a marirage license one night and Iler showing up in your place to say you'd changed your mind. Since then no word from you at all. So why this sudden fever to be friends with me?"

His shots must have told. She caught her lip between her teeth, as though to stop its trembling, then faltered, "We —we were so young, Clem. I wasn't quite seventeen, you know. And all Dad asked was that we wait. I wrote you right away, but you'd enlisted and the letter came back. Then I wrote your father for your address, but he didn't answer. What more could I do?"

He laughed shortly, and the sound echoed all the bitterness he'd stored up just by trying to forget the way she looked at this very moment. "You could have waited, Janet. Girls have been known to wait three years, some kind of girls."

He was baiting her and she knew it. She flushed hotly, little red flags of anger appearing in each smooth check. And at that very moment a car turned into the yard and braked to a stop beside them. A flashy red convertible, bright with chrome trimmings.

The man who got out of the driver's seat seemed to match the car in elegance. He wore Western clothes but the kind worn only for show, definitely not the kind men worked in. And he was bare-headed, like any green tenderfoot, and his thick, black hair shone glossily in the sun. Clem disliked him even before the fellow caught Janet's hand and held it with possessive familiarity.

"Hi, Jan," the newcomer said airily. "How's tricks today?"

There was a proud lift to Janet's head as she smiled at the black-headed man. And something like defiance was in her voice as she introduced him to Clem. "My fiance, Bond Merrill, Clem. And a new Piedra grower."

So Clem had his answer. She hadn't waited, just as he had known she wouldn't. Girls seldom did. It took a man to be that kind of fool.

Bond Merrill put out a soft hand, his eyes registering interest. "Clem Sadler, eh? I heard you'd come to take over. Nice setup you've got, Sadler. I talked to your father about selling when I first came out here, little more than a year ago. But he wasn't interested."

"He wouldn't be," Clem said shortly. Then he added, just for the record, "And neither am I."

Merrill smiled, giving Clem the impression that here was a man very sure of himself. "Neither am I interested in buying now," Merrill said.

LATE THAT afternoon Clem was surprised by a visit from Iler Higbee. The sheep rancher came riding up to the barn as Clem was finishing his evening chores. He didn't dismount, but looking at Clem with doubtful eyes, said brusquely, "Jan said you were over today, Clem. Thought I'd come by and straighten things out. If you're blaming me for things happening to your sheep, you're wrong."

Clem's grin had no friendliness in it. "Am I wrong in thinking you'd like to have my summer range, Higbee? Maybe you're not interested in case it's re-allocated."

Color tinged Higbee's seamed face. "You know damn well I'd like to have it," he snapped. "Every grower in the basin would, since you've got the only good water holes there are in dry seasons. But damn it to hell, Clem, I'm not stooping to sheep killing to get it. Not even your dad would have thought that of me."

"What Dad thought about you won't bear repeating," Clem said angrily. "And I think exactly the same way. I'm warning you now, Higbee, I'm loading a shotgun for your next sheep-killing visit, and I aim to use it."

Higbee picked up his reins, said stiffly, "I can see you still got a lot of kinks in your thinking, Clem. Most of us have learned these past few years that we can't be so goldarned independent of each other. Even men we don't like we sometimes need a hand from."

Clem's short laugh was a sneer. "I'll get along, Higbee. All I ask is to be let alone. But if I can get proof you killed my sheep you'll be needing a hand."

He stopped because Higbee was gone. He'd wheeled his horse and was galloping furiously away, his anger betrayed by the set of his shoulders and the way he quirted his horse. Clem shrugged and stamped into the house.

After his lonely supper, eaten in a kitchen that seemed as big and cheerless as an empty mess hall, Clem saddled again and rode off toward the sheep camp. Until that inspection by the grazier, he was going to stick with his sheep like an old mother hen with her chickens.

Following his orders, Pedro had brought his band of two thousand up close to what was left of the Indian's fifteen hundred. Now the two bands were bedded down within a short distance of each other along the lower side of the river.

With the river bluff providing a fortress wall on one side and no timber larger than sagebrush clumps in the immediate vicinity of the bedding grounds, it was simple to patrol the sleeping bands. Clem sent his herders to their tents and took the first watch himself.

Four hours passed and nothing happened. Clem felt unaccountably lonely, riding that half-circle of range over and over. Even his thoughts weren't good company. He kept seeing Janet's face and the yellow sheen of her hair and cursing himself for remembering. She'd forgotten easily enough, hadn't she? Why couldn't Clem? But the bitter memory of that humiliating night had stayed with him for three years, and he knew it always would. Just as his need for Janet stayed with him. And as his hatred for Iler Higbee stayed, too, a cankerous sore inside his mind.

Around midnight Clem dozed a little in his saddle, just seconds at a time. Then he would jerk awake and strain his eyes through the starlit night to be sure things were just as they had been. At one such time he was startled to see a small flare in a draw about a quarter of a mile up the mountainside. It looked like fire, the constant dread of every mountain rancher or wool grower. Clem hurriedly spurred his horse and rode that way to investigate.

It was fire! He saw that before he'd quite reached the place where some underbrush was burning. But the fire was small and hadn't spread, and if he worked fast he could soon have it out. Turning his horse, Clem rode back to the river where he stripped the saddle from the animal to get the blanket under it.

With the water-soaked blanket he remounted bareback and rode back quickly to the fire. It was the work of only a few moments to beat out the flickering flame. Only then did Clem have to wonder if the fire had been deliberately set.

Pulling out his pocket flash he bent over to look for clues that might answer that question. There was a faint sound behind him, and he started to turn. Before he'd done more than half turned his head something crashed against it, the stars all ran together in a brilliant display of fireworks and then the blackout came.

THE NEXT Clem knew it was gray dawn. He lay where he had fallen, almost on top of the blackened embers of the fire he'd quenched. He had lain there at least four hours.

He sat up, clutching his head to keep it from exploding. There were a million little demons of pain beating an anvil chorus inside it, and his groping fingers felt the egg-shaped lump over his ear. Somebody who knew just how hard to hit had laid him out good with a blackjack.

Through a haze of pain, questions hammered into Clem and he struggled to his feet. His horse wasn't in sight, had either been spooked or taken away. Staggering and groaning, he started for the river and the sheep camp beyond, fear for what he would find whipping him on.

A brief stop at the river, where he bathed his face and head in the cold

water, helped. Then, driven by a mounting anger that was even stronger than the sickening fear. Clem hurried to the bedding grounds.

Pedro's band was all right, he saw at once. Untended, they still slept, looking like a field of gray stone in the early morning light. Then he saw the Indian's band and a groan broke his lips. There was only a pitiful remnant of them left. Maybe less than half. And they weren't sleeping but milling restlessly around.

Clem's first act was to locate the herders. He found both in their tents, in exactly the same condition as himself. Somebody had crept in while they slept and used the blackjack to make sure they wouldn't wake too soon.

Later, it was Pedro who found the reason for it all. "Thieves," he said grimly, pointing out the marks of truck tires —lightly indented marks where the truck had come in empty, the deeply embedded treads when it had left full.

"A double decker," Pedro said. "And my bet, Señor Clem, is that those woollies will never get to market on the hoofs. The young ones ees all gone, see?"

It was sound reasoning, but Clem was sure somebody smarter than black-market thieves was behind this. It tied up too well with what had gone before. Thieves wouldn't get that bold unless they were promised protection. Tired and discouraged, with his head going like an air-riveting hammer, he rode back to his house to think things out.

A YELLOW roadster stood in the yard and his back kitchen door was open. Clem stood in it, looking with surprise at the girl who worked at his sink, washing up his last night's supper dishes. Coffee gurgled on the stove, and Clem hadn't known how hungry he was until the fragrant odor of it hit him square in his empty stomach.

But the sight of Janet, in a blue linen dress that made her hair a deeper yellow than gold, hit Clem even harder. She looked so completely right in his kitchen, which was no longer big and empty and cheerless. It now seemed warm and brightly welcoming, as a man's kitchen should.

The thought only added to the storm inside Clem. Hadn't he had enough without Janet adding this to it? All his pent-up emotions came to a head in a seething volcano of rage, and he lashed out at her cruelly.

"Is this some of that helping hand stuff your dad was prating about yesterday? If it is, it's being wasted. If you've got a yen to play domestic why don't you go prettify Bond Merrill's kitchen?"

She dried her hands on a kitchen towel before turning to face him, calmly beautiful and poised. It was her poise that irritated Clem most, making him feel like a bad-mannered schoolboy.

"I didn't come for the purpose you seem to think, Clem," Janet said quietly. "There was something I wanted to tell you, and when you weren't here I decided to wait. And—well, I just washed dishes while I waited. To have something to do."

She was carefully explaining that she hadn't been trying to make him feel under obligation, Clem knew. Well, she hadn't and he didn't, so he wished to hell she'd get going before he made any bigger fool of himself. Clem was beginning to realize he couldn't trust what he might say or do around Janet Higbee.

"I wanted to tell you, Clem," she went on, "that I've learned the grazier from Cortez would visit your range today. Maybe this morning. After what you said yesterday about losing sheep, I thought it only fair to warn you."

He laughed at that, a short, ugly sound. "Your warning comes a trifle late, good neighbor. Over five hundred head were stolen from me last night, after me and both my herders were conked on the bean. I now have less than twenty-five hundred head to show him, instead of the thirty-five hundred I'm supposed to have. What do you think the grazier will say to that?"

Janet stared at him, speechless with horror. Clem went right on with this

bitter tirade, hardly pausing for breath.

"I'll tell you what he'll say—that I've only the makings of one good band, that my range lease should be corrected to give me a few flea-bitten acres off in the mountains somewhere that only goats can reach and no water. And I can't increase for I won't have range enough. But Iler Higbee will have the choice section he's been wanting for twelve years, due to his dirty trickery."

Janet came to life at that. "Not Iler Higbee! Oh, you're such a fool, Clem, to think that of Dad. He's hard-hearted and stubborn sometimes, but he's not a crook. He'd help you if you'd let him."

"Not me he won't," Clem said roughly. "I think I can struggle along without any Higbee help. So thanks for the warning which I can't use and the kitchen help which I didn't need."

HE TURNED then and walked swiftly to the barn. When a man is hard hit he doesn't care to have a girl standing around, waiting to see him crack. And Clem was hard hit. Not just by the impending loss of his grazing privileges, which would be a blow to any sheepman, nor even by big financial loss he'd suffered in the dead and stolen sheep. What got Clem worse was the way he had to lie down and take all this. He was licked before he'd really gotten started, and he didn't like the feeling. Joe Sadler had been one of the biggest wool growers in the district. His son would be a joke wherever sheepmen congregated.

Clem was dozing when he heard the car drive up a couple of hours later. Thinking it was the grazier, he went to the door and saw it was Janet again. She got out and ran toward him, her amber eyes bright with excitement.

"The grazier's coming, Clem. I passed him on the road a little way back. Now I'm asking you as a special favor to let me drive you and him up to your range. Please, Clem, it's all I'll ever ask of you."

He couldn't get that, but her earnestness moved him in spite of himself. "Why, Janet? It's rough to take a car. I've horses waiting."

Another car was turning into the yard, and Janet said hurriedly, "I'll explain later. But please, please ask me to drive you up. You know I can go almost anywhere in this old jalopy."

The grazier from Cortez, a heavy-jowled man Clem knew only vaguely, left his car and came over to explain his errand to Clem.

"I've been expecting you, Morgan," Clem said. "And Miss Higbee here is waiting to drive us up."

He didn't know why he said that. Just something compelling in Janet's eyes made him.

The grazier looked at Janet and frankly liked the idea. "Suits me," he said enthusiastically. "Only time I ride horses is when I have to."

Clem knew they'd be smarter to take the horses, but he'd decided to give Janet the lead rope she wanted. Whatever she was up to, she'd soon be showing her hand. He went around to open the car door for her and felt her brush against him and thought he heard the faint crackle of paper. But when he turned she was fumbling about the tire, saying it looked a little low, then hastily deciding it didn't.

But they hadn't gone a quarter of a mile when there was the definite sickening bump of a flat tire. Janet braked to a stop, uttering twittering exclamations over the delay. Clem got out, opened the trunk compartment and hauled out the spare. It hit the ground with a soft thud and he choked back an oath. This tire was as soft as the other.

Inquiry developed there were no tools, either. Nothing at all with which to repair a leaky tire and inflate it again. Janet said, wide-eyed, "I never carry tools for I wouldn't know how to use them. And I almost never have flats."

Clem looked at her suspiciously. She hadn't used to be that kind of nitwit. Apparently she wasn't in the least concerned about the bother she'd caused by insisting on bringing the car.

Janet merely said sweetly, "I really

don't see anything to do, Clem, but take to the horses after all. But there's no use in making poor Mr. Morgan walk back in the hot sun. He and I will just wait here till you get back with them."

Mr. Morgan seemed to like that idea thoroughly. Clem didn't, but he was too mad to risk saying anything. All he could do was trudge back for the horses he had known they should have taken in the first place. And every foot of the way he was telling himself fiercely that this was the last time a Higbee would make a fool out of him.

BY THE time he'd saddled the waiting horses, and caught another and hunted up a saddle for Janet, and got back to where the others waited in the car, well over an hour had passed. But the grazier and Janet didn't seem in the least put out by the long wait, and Clem's disgusted anger increased. He thought again how changed Janet was. She hadn't gone in for cheap flirtations in the days when he had known her and been in love with her.

When still some distance from the grazing range they heard the unmistakable sound of moving sheep—the plaintive wailing, the clattering of bells and tin cans and the yells of the drivers. Clem straightened up in surprise and nudged his horse to a faster pace. He'd given orders to John and Pedro to hold the sheep stationary until after the inspection. But there was no other band on that mountain and on his range.

Janet slowed them down again by insisting her horse had gone lame. Nothing would do her but that Clem dismount and examine a front hoof that was completely free of pebbles. And then she didn't seem to know how to hold the horse still, and in exasperation Clem finally had to ask her to dismount until he'd finished. Fifteen more minutes had been lost and the sound of the sheep had diminshed by the time they rode on.

Coming in sight of his sheep, Clem choked back an exclamation of surprise. There seemed to be a lot more than there'd been this morning! The whole mountainside was a dirty gray, and the Indian's band looked every bit as large as Pedro's. He glanced at Janet suspiciously, but her calm face told him nothing.

The grazier was plainly surprised, too. After he'd made his rough count he rode back to where Clem waited and said so.

"I was given to understand you'd greatly reduced the number you were grazing, Sadler. But my count says you've close to four thousand here. If they're all yours—"

There was doubt and suspicion and regret in his voice. Clem, recovering from his surprise, decided somebody was playing sleight of hand tricks with him. First they took away and then they put back. He didn't like such games and opened his mouth to say so. To hell with his Taylor permit. Those sheep weren't his, and he wasn't going to claim them.

THE ARRIVAL of Bond Merrill stopped him. The dudish grower came galloping recklessly across the range, almost running down sheep in his haste. As he pulled rein in front of the grazier, Clem noted that his saddle and gear were silver-trimmed, as expensively showy as his car.

Following Merrill, but less recklessly, rode Iler Higbee. Looks like a showdown, Clem thought grimly, and, wondering what the game was and who was playing it, he waited for his cue.

Ignoring the others, Merrill spoke angrily to Morgan. "You've been tricked, Morgan. I happen to know that at least fifteen-hundred head of these sheep don't belong to Sadler at all. Sadler moved in a whole band just a little while ago. Ask him. He won't dare deny it."

The grazier looked his question at Higbee and the grower nodded. "That's right. But I reckon Sadler can show you a bill of sale for them. If somebody kills or steals his sheep and he wants to buy more I guess that's his business, ain't it?"

Morgan turned to Clem. "You got the bill of sale, Sadler?"

Speechless with surprise, Clem looked

at Janet. Her amber eyes were talking to him and she put her hand into her jacket pocket. Only then did he remember that faint crackle of paper as she brushed against him. Putting a hand into his own suede jacket, he pulled out a paper that shouldn't have been there and offered it to Morgan without glancing at it. He knew it would be a bill of sale.

The grazier looked the paper over and handed it back to Clem. "Looks on the level to me." Again there was that note of regret in his voice.

"But it's not, I tell you!" Merrill screamed with angry disappointment. "It's a crooked frame-up."

Janet's clear voice stopped him. "As crooked as killing and stealing a man's sheep so you can get his grazing range, Bond? I don't think I'd talk about crooked deals if I were you."

Merrill swung about to face her, his handsome face mottled and ugly with anger. "You can't prove talk like that, Janet. Just because I told you I'd made application for this lease—"

"And boasted you'd fixed it with Morgan to give it to you," she broke in scathingly. "All he had to do was clear himself by finding Clem's tally short, so you made certain it would be. Only it wasn't, was it?"

One look at Merrill's face and Clem knew the girl had given him the whole picture. He hit the ground running, straight for the man in the silver-trimmed saddle. Grabbing Merrill's hand, he gave a jerk and the dudish grower sprawled on the ground.

"Get up," Clem ordered, standing grimly over him. "Get up and take what's coming to you, you dirty sheep killer!"

Merrill scrambled up, uttering lame protests of innocence. Clem cut him short by slamming a fist into his mouth. He went down again, spitting blood. When he wouldn't get up Clem grabbed him by his fancy shirt and hauled him up.

Seeing he had to fight, Merrill swung a haymaker at Clem. Clem rolled his head with the blow and didn't feel it. Then he turned loose with everything he had, and it was plenty.

FOR A FEW minutes Merrill fought back desperately. But his blows were ill-timed and misplaced, while every one of Clem's went right where he told it to. And each time his fist connected with Merrill's soft flesh he felt a savage exultation. Very soon Merrill's face looked like a dirty, blood-soaked sponge, and when a blow over his heart sent him to the ground he stayed there, covering his face with his hands.

Clem had to quit in disgust. You can't keep fighting a man after the fight's gone out of him.

After Morgan and Merrill had ridden off, Clem folded Merrill's blood-spotted check for the sheep killed and put it into his pocket. Then he tackled the job that was still waiting for him.

"I've been a fool," he bluntly told Iler Higbee and his daughter. "But because you and Dad always fought so, Iler, I just supposed it was you making the trouble for me."

Higbee's eyes lit up wistfully. "We sure had some sweet fights, me and your dad. But always fair fights, Clem. Neither one of us would have skunked the other, and we both knew it. When Janet learned what Bond was up to I was fighting mad myself."

Janet said softly, "I wanted to offer you help this morning, Clem, but you were so pig-headed I couldn't. Then Dad and I decided to do it anyway. But I had a terrible time holding you and Morgan back until Dad could move the sheep."

A lump had come into Clem's throat, making him speechless. And he knew there was a lot he ought to say to Iler Higbee.

The old wool grower said it for him. "I guess liking or not liking a man ain't the important thing, Clem. It's the kind of man he is. And having good enemies is all right, too. It sort of keeps life from getting into a dull rut."

Clem laughed and took the hand Iler offered. Then he dropped it and took Janet's and forgot to turn it loose. For the amber eyes were saying even more than her soft voice, "I'm glad we waited, Clem. Now we'll be sure." ● ● ●

MUDDY WATERS

By William Freeman Hough

SHE HATED HIM . . . yet she couldn't seem to keep away

ALL THE WAY up the steep trail Mel Williams had the feeling that he was being watched, and not by the ranger who should have checked his small herd into the National Forest. That feeling was still definite when the forty head of Herefords spread out across the Alpine meadow and began browsing in the rich feed there.

He crossed a leg over the saddle, built a smoke and let his eyes wander over the surrounding territory. He saw nothing but the brush-lined meadow and the rugged peaks that rose above it on all sides. With a shrug he cupped a match in the palm of his hand. But even as the match flared, his eyes continued to search the meadow.

Continued vigilance was rewarded when, half an hour later, he saw a slight movement in the brush at the far side. It wasn't much of a movement, but

"I've never shot at a man before," she said

Copyright, 1943, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in the Second June, 1943, Ranch Romances

enough to be caught by his trained eyes. Lifting rein, he moved his horse slowly along the slope, aiming for a spot above where the brush had moved. Reaching the bank of a noisy little mountain stream he let his horse drink. Then, crossing over, he turned down a narrow trail and made his move.

The figure crouched in the trail was forced to leap wildly to escape being run down. Mel pulled in his horse and observed first of all a pair of flashing eyes. Slowly a smile spread his lips. He nodded his head. "Hello," he said.

The girl wore a pair of faded overalls, a ragged blouse cut from an old dress and a pair of tattered boots. There was no hat on her head and the curls that draped her shoulders were tangled.

"You!" she said, and her bosom rose and fell swiftly.

"It's Crissy, ain't it?" he asked.

"Who said you could come here?" she snapped at him.

"Look who wants to know!" he returned. "It so happens I've got a permit to graze cattle up here."

For a moment the anger in her eyes was changed to anxiety. Then her dislike for the man on the horse returned with a rush. Her lips parted but she could find no words to express her feelings.

"You've grown a heap the past two years," he observed. "I haven't seen you since—"

"Since you sent my dad to prison!" she broke in.

"I didn't send him to prison, Crissy. I just caught him dragging a hungry loop. The court did the rest."

"I hate you," she stormed. "I'll get even with you."

Though she had grown during the past two years, she still wasn't very big. She stood there, a tight little bundle of anger and resentment, venting her wrath mostly through her blazing eyes. He figured she'd been about sixteen at the time of the trial. That would make her eighteen now.

"I reckon you don't understand," he said gently, realizing that he would have difficulty in making her understand his position. She was such a wild little creature. And what was she doing up here in the hills? Surely not living alone, although he was becoming convinced that she could well look out for herself.

"You'd better get out!" she cried at him.

He shook his head. "I've got a permit to graze cattle up here. I don't get out just because a girl tells me to."

"You—you—" She choked off what she meant to say, turned in the trail and sprang off into the thick brush. He could see her head at times as she crashed on toward a tree-filled draw above which curled the remnants of the morning mist.

"Well," he said softly, "I'll be danged."

ON THE way back to his summer camp at the foot of the hills he pondered the strange meeting. It seemed fantastic to him that Crissy Grant should be living alone in the hills, though heaven knew she had lived nothing but a wild life since she was born. No mother since she was five and a father who made no effort at an honest living. Was it possible some of the old rustling gang had come back to this section and she was living with them? His eyes narrowed with the thought, for it meant that his precious Herefords would take constant watching if this were true.

He paused but briefly at his camp below the hills and went on to town. He needed a few more supplies and a talk with the district ranger. But all the way in he could not forget the girl he had met in the tangled trail beside the mountain stream. It had been a wild setting, but he was forced to admit that Christina Grant had not lost by it. She was something more than pretty, even in her crude clothing. And the fact that she still hated him prodded him somewhat.

It was late afternoon when he rode up the street and dismounted before the district ranger's office. He found Tom Adair bent over a map, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Oh, hello," greeted the ranger.

Mel laid a paper on the desk. "My tally," he said. "There was no ranger to check me into the Forest."

"I'll take your word for it, of course, Williams. There was no ranger to check you in because I have no ranger for that section. We're awful short of help this year."

"No help up there at all? Not even a lookout for Buck Peak?"

"I was lucky there, Williams. Got a girl to act as fire lookout this year. Name is Crissy Grant. You should know her, I think."

"Yeah," said Mel dryly, "I know her."

Tom Adair leaned back in his chair. "I hope you two get along all right this summer. I seem to remember that you had trouble with the Grant family a couple of years ago."

"In line of duty, Adair. I was sheriff then and caught Grant and two other fellows dead to rights rustling stock. Grant turned state's evidence and got off with a light term. The other two got away from me while I was taking 'em to the pen."

"A bad break for you, Williams."

"Bad enough. It cost me reelection to office. Reckon I'll never be able to live it down." While Adair scribbled his signature to the tally, Mel went on, "So Crissy is your lookout up at Buck Peak, eh?"

"She wanted the job and I was glad to take her on. Got a pair of sharp eyes, that girl. I guess she's been up against it since her father went to the pen."

"I haven't seen her since the day of the trial," said Mel. "That is, not until today. I met her up there near the meadow and she told me to get out."

"She didn't understand that you were grazing under permit."

"Mebbe not, but I do know she still hates me."

"Try to get along with her, Williams. I've got enough troubles as it is."

"Oh, sure, Adair. I'm not hunting trouble with her. Why should I?"

This seemed to terminate the conversation, so Mel went down the street to get his additional supplies. He rode home across the flats feeling oddly satisfied with conditions. Crissy wasn't living with any rustlers; she was the lookout up at Buck Peak. Of course he'd have no trouble with her, but he secretly hoped that he would see her again, and often. It might be that he would wear down her dislike for him. It was a pleasing thought.

HIS CAMP at the base of the hills consisted of a hastily constructed cabin and a shed for his horse. The stream whose source was back in the hills came out of a shallow draw and ran past the camp, furnishing him with plenty of cold, clear water. Not a bad setup for summer.

The moon, almost full, was well up when he rode in from town. He loosened rein to let his horse drink from the stream, and noticed that the water was riled up near the bank. And in the soft earth further on was the fresh print of a horse's hoof, not made by his own mount.

Much interested, he unsaddled, put the horse in the shed and went to the cabin. Outside the door was a bench upon which stood a bucket and a wash basin. The earth about the door was soft from spilled water, and here he noticed the imprint of a small and badly run-down boot.

"So," he said softly. "Crissy paid me a visit, eh? Maybe she was sorry for the way she talked today."

He turned to stare back toward the hills and saw moonlight on the high and forbidding bosom of Buck Peak. She hadn't been long from the camp as was evidenced by the muddy condition of the stream. He was tempted to follow her, then thought better of it and went into his cabin.

He was at the Alpine meadow by daybreak the next morning, checking his stock and scanning the country. Buck Peak wore a heavy cloak of cloud and could not be seen. Mists drifted upward along the stream, partly hiding the rimmy brush. Remembering the encounter he'd had with Crissy, Mel rode across

the meadow and crossed the stream at about the same spot. Then he came down the trail.

She stood knee deep in the cold water, fishing intently with a short pole cut from some alder thicket. She hooked a trout but the fish got free and she shook her head angrily. He could not believe that she did not suspect his presence.

"You should've kept your line tighter, Crissy," he said.

"It wasn't that," she flung back over her shoulder. "I just couldn't see the critter, that's what. You muddied the water when you crossed up above. Muddy water always means trouble."

"Always?"

"Always," she repeated.

"It didn't spell that last night down at my camp." Was that fresh red stealing up her neck?

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh yes you do. You came to the camp last night. Left just before I got home. I saw your tracks by the door. And the stream was muddy. Did you come to tell me you were sorry, Crissy?"

"No!" she cried and began coiling up the fish line.

"Then why—" She had turned toward the bank but had slipped upon a smooth rock to sit down in the water with a splash. Mel knew better than to laugh. Swinging down from his horse, he waded in, took her beneath the shoulders and lifted. For an instant her wet body was close to his. "I was hoping you'd come to say that, Crissy," he murmured.

"No, I didn't come to say that at all."

"Then what did you come for?"

"To tell you how I hate you!"

"You shouldn't feel that way."

"But I do. You let me go now."

"Please, Crissy."

She twisted in his arms angrily. Mel let her go free and stepped back.

"I guess you'll always be a little hellcat," he said.

She stumbled up the bank and faced him. "You mind your own business," she cried. "Nobody asked you here."

"You talk one way and act another. There's just as good fishing further upstream, but you came here just to see me."

This accusation left her wholly breathless. All she could do was stamp a foot in the trail and stare at him.

He came out of the stream and stood before her, a grave smile upon his lips. "We could be friends," he suggested, "if you didn't have that crazy notion about me."

She put a hand to her throat to still the beat of her pulse there. "I wish I could tell you how much I really hate you," she choked out.

"We're here in the hills together," he pursued patiently. "You're lookout up at Buck Peak and I've got cattle here in the meadow."

"You stay in your place and I'll stay in mine," she flung at him.

Turning, she brushed past his waiting horse and on up the trail, soaked boots making a squashing sound after the brush had closed in about her small, damp form.

Mel remounted and crossed the stream to the meadow side. "Contrary as hell," he said aloud. "I know danged well she came down here this morning just to see me, yet she cusses me out. Oh well, so be it."

But this was far from a satisfactory conclusion. He thought of it all that day and was more convinced than ever that their relationship could not remain as it was. But how in the world was a man to overcome such prejudice?

The next morning he rode back to the stream, but she wasn't there, and the extent of his disappointment alarmed him. All day he kept his gaze toward Buck Peak, but saw no sign of life up there. The small cabin anchored at the peak appeared as gray and desolate as the rock itself. Had she pulled freight on him, given up the job?

TWO DAYS later as he was returning to his camp in the late afternoon, he came face to face with her again on the trail just north of his camp. She was astride a sorry-looking old horse and had evidently been to town, for she

wore a dress, and behind the scarred saddle was tied an old flour sack containing some lumpy objects. Both halted, for the trail was steep and it would take some maneuvering to pass.

"Take the inside," said Mel. "I'll edge along the outer rim. That is, if you promise not to push me off."

"That never entered my head, but it's a good idea," she told him.

He grinned and urged his horse forward. It was a squeeze and, in passing, the skirt of his saddle caught the flour sack and ripped it open. Objects fell to the trail. As soon as he could safely dismount, Mel went back to help her pick them up. They stooped together, heads close, and their hands closed over the same objects at the same time. Crissy Grant lost some color and wouldn't meet his gaze as they straightened up.

Mel tied the broken sack with some string. "The air feels like storm," he said. "I wouldn't linger on the trail if I were you."

His speech didn't indicate the turmoil in his mind. He watched her mount and tuck the dress over her knees. Clucking to the old horse, she went on up the trail without a backward glance.

"Tobacco," he said when she was out of hearing. "Two sacks of tobacco! Crissy don't smoke, so there's men up yonder. No wonder she fished low in the stream. She wanted to keep watch on me." He beat the horn of his saddle with a calloused palm. "Maybe Skipper Bowles or Scudder. Maybe both of 'em. Brother, if I could just get my hands on those gents again!"

Bowles and Scudder were the two men he had caught rustling with Crissy's father, Marsh Grant—the two men who had escaped from him after the trial. That affair had cost him his office and sent him back to the task of building up a herd. It had hurt his pride and, worst of all, left a cloud over his reputation for honesty. It was still rumored that he had accepted a bribe from his prisoners.

He cooked and ate his evening meal mechanically, his mind fully occupied with plans. Crissy was no dumbbell. She would know that his suspicions would be aroused by the sight of those two sacks of tobacco. She was sure to tell Scudder or Bowles, or both of them, what had occurred, and they wouldn't linger around to greet the one-time sheriff they had tricked.

"I should have suspicioned something right from the start," he grumbled as he prepared to ride back into the hills shortly after dark. "Birds of a feather! It's in her blood, that's what. I wouldn't be surprised if she hadn't sheltered those buzzards ever since they got away from me. Maybe she's married to one of 'em."

This last thought left a dry and uncomfortable taste in his mouth. Crissy was just a kid yet. If a good man got ahold of her he might be able to change her ways. She was pretty, danged pretty, and had plenty of courage, too.

He turned east below the meadow rim and made his way slowly up a side draw that leaned steeply against the bosom of the hills. The moon came out for a short while, then vanished behind a bank of dark, scudding clouds. A roll of thunder echoed across the peaks and dropped booming sounds into the draw. Then the heights above were lighted briefly by sheet lightning. The air felt flat, heavy. He hoped it would storm. That would give his quarry the idea that he would not venture out this night.

HE MET the first gust of wind as he left the draw and headed north through the sharp ridges above timberline. That gust was hot, then cold, meaning that it was raining heavily somewhere to the north. Behind him a jagged streak of lightning bit savagely into the draw he had left. He hoped that it would not start a fire in the big trees there.

He thought of his Herefords in the meadow below. They were sheltered somewhat, but thunder and lightning might start them, scatter them all over the forest. Still, even that catastrophe wouldn't matter so much if he could but throw a gun on the men he wanted.

He doubted if he could have made the journey without the aid of the lightning

which now kept up a continual flashing. Off to his left and slightly higher than his trail, lifted Buck Peak, gray and forbidding, solid against the fury of the storm. He saw it often as the lightning sheared across the sky and bathed it in white. A drop of rain smacked his cheek and he bent his head to the blast.

On the east and steeper side of Buck Peak he anchored his horse to the exposed root of gnarled oak. The tree was sturdy and wouldn't blow over on his mount no matter how hard the wind raged.

Tightening his belt, he began the hard climb, fighting the rush of wind and the uncertain footing. Gravel stung his face, for it wasn't raining hard enough to wet it down. Yard by yard he advanced, now and then glancing upward toward the squat cabin. At no time did he see a light shining through the windows.

"Like as not I'm the goat again," he muttered. "They've skipped out, and Crissy with 'em."

The storm increased its fury. The higher he went, the more he felt the force of the wind. He was six thousand feet up and the hard labor left him short of breath. Once when he halted to rest he felt the sharp shock of a bolt of lightning which struck the peak and came streaming down one of the thick cables that anchored the cabin to the peak. That hot streak burned oxygen from the air and left him more breathless than ever. But at last he gained the top and flung himself down beside the cabin wall to regain his strength.

It shouldn't be difficult to determine whether anyone still was in the cabin. If the door was barred, they'd be there. He crept around to the north side and laid a hand on the latch. It lifted under his pressure, but the door did not open. Barred!

His heart beat faster as he swung about the cabin, leaning into the wind. There were three windows on the south side, all of them shuttered. He stood near the center one and debated his next move. Faintly, above the roar of the wind, came the tinkle of a bell. He pressed his head to the window and listened.

CRISSY was inside. He heard her talking over the phone which connected Buck Peak with the ranger office in town. Probably Adair was checking on her, asking if the lightning had started any fires. This must have been the question, for shortly afterward she came to the window and opened the shutters. Mel had to duck quickly to escape being seen. She went back to the phone, leaving the shutters open. This was his chance.

Hoping the storm would cover any noise he made, Mel slid the window up and threw a leg over the sill. He sat balanced there for a second, then started to draw up his other leg.

It was then that a hand grasped him by the shoulder. He sensed a descending weapon and jerked his head aside. The window glass above him crashed as a heavy poker smashed into it. Throwing his weight into the body near him, he bore it back. The man stumbled over something in the dark and let out a groan. Then a miniature cyclone fell upon Mel.

It took him two full minutes to pin her arms tightly and hold her so that she could not strike or kick him. He worked a hand free and drew his gun. Pushing Crissy along the wall, he came to a table nailed against the side of the cabin.

"I'm going to turn you loose and count to five," he said. "After that you strike a light."

For some strange reason all resistance left her; he could feel her relax against him. "It's—it's Williams," she said aloud and Mel could sense relief in her voice.

"Of course it's Williams," he said. "Who were you expecting? Careful, now, I'm moving aside. Get the light going."

He was crouched and ready when the flame flickered up from the lamp on the table. His eyes swept the room, saw a man sitting on the floor rubbing a knee. That man was Marsh Grant. He looked

years older than the day he went to prison. He was thin and gray, and there was something akin to perpetual fear in his faded eyes.

"You, eh?" said Mel. "When did you escape?"

"He didn't escape," said Crissy sharply. "They gave him a parole on account of good behavior."

Marsh Grant nodded. "That's right, Williams. They ain't a thing you can do to me. I'm up here with Crissy to rest."

"It's funny I didn't hear about the parole," said Mel. "Anybody else know you're here? Adair know about it?"

"No," said Crissy, speaking again. "We didn't want anybody to know about it. But I suppose it'll be all over the country now."

Marsh Grant pulled himself up from the floor and sat down on a chair. "They'll hear of it now, and that'll be the end of me."

"Who'll hear of it?"

"Scudder and Bowles. When I turned state's evidence they swore to kill me for it."

"That was just talk, Grant."

The older man shook his head. "You don't know them gents like I do. They meant what they said. That's one reason I came here, so they mebbe wouldn't find me."

"You didn't have to turn state's evidence," said Mel. "I'd caught you all dead to rights."

"Well, I wanted to get off as easy as I could. I wanted to get out soon and look after Crissy. Tonight is just a sample of what I was afraid of."

"You mean me coming up here? Well, I wouldn't have come if I hadn't suspected there was a man or men up here. I saw the sacks of tobacco Crissy was bringing up."

Crissy had been standing with her back to the wall, looking first at one man and then at the other. "You thought that I was bringing tobacco to some—to—"

"To maybe Scudder or Bowles."

Her face flamed and her eyes sparkled with anger. "You think I'd have any truck with those men? I hate 'em! They've swore to kill my dad."

Mel shrugged. "All I did was read the sign," he said. "If Scudder or Bowles was here I meant to get 'em. I got a score to settle with those two cow-snatchers."

THE CABIN shook as a fresh blast of wind burst upon it. Marsh Grant rubbed his thin knees carefully and a new expression filled his eyes. "I'm glad you're here, Williams. You're the protection I've got to have. Sooner or later those fellas will learn I'm out of prison and they'll come hunting me. They'll figger I've joined Crissy, and when they locate her—" He spread his hands to indicate his helplessness.

A sense of satisfaction was building up in Mel. Marsh Grant was back and should serve as an excellent decoy. This was almost as good as finding Scudder or Bowles in the cabin. In a way it was better, for it meant that Crissy was not mixed up with them. Thinking this over, he saw at least one reason why she wouldn't be mixed up with them—they had threatened her father.

"I daren't build a fire in the stove while it's blowing so hard or I'd make some coffee," she said.

Marsh Grant said with almost pitiful eagerness, "Why don't you stay with us tonight, Williams? It'll be mighty hard getting down off the peak in this storm. Wait till it's over."

Mel looked at Crissy, who gave no sign that she approved the idea. It was hardly possible that Scudder and Bowles, even if they were in this section of the country, would try to come up this night. Then, too, they might not know that Grant was out of prison.

"I'll stay for a while," he nevertheless agreed.

Crissy extinguished the lamp and went to the window where the shutter was banging back and forth. She stared into the night, came back to the ranger phone and called the office down in town to report a fire somewhere far to the west. Then she went back to the window to

watch and Mel joined her. He could smell rain in the air, but none was falling on the peak.

"It seems a sort of pity that you hate me so," he said to her. "After all, I was sheriff and had a job to do."

"Maybe I don't hate you so much now," she murmured.

"Because I may be able to grab Scudder and Bowles and save your dad?"

"I reckon I can look out for Dad," she told him tartly. "I'm not afraid of those men."

Mel believed her. She was a fiery little critter, sure enough.

He said, not knowing exactly why, "I'll try and not muddy up your fishing any more."

"Muddy water means trouble," she said once more. "I wasn't really fishing, just keeping an eye on you. I didn't want you coming up here to bother Dad."

"Why should I bother him?"

"How was I to know you wouldn't?" she flared. "You sent him to prison."

Mel permitted himself a small sigh and turned from her. Marsh Grant was rolling a cigarette and Mel saw, when the match was lighted, that the man's fingers trembled. Grant was afraid, terribly frightened. "I wish you'd never let those old pards of mine get away from you," he said huskily.

"Maybe you don't think I wish the same thing, Grant. That escape cost me more than you'll guess. I'd like nothing better than to meet up with 'em again."

"They're killers, Williams. I know that."

Mel rubbed the palms of his hands together. "I only hope they hear you're out and come back to this section."

"I've been here almost two weeks. They should know it by now."

So Crissy had been harboring her father that length of time! Mel wondered if Adair knew of it. Likely not, or he would have mentioned it.

The night dragged on. Crissy kept a watch out the window and twice called Adair to report on the fire further west. The last time she told him it could no longer be seen. Likely it was raining in that section and the fire had been drenched.

WHEN DAYLIGHT broke across the hills Mel took his departure with just a word of farewell to Crissy. Marsh Grant was sleeping at the time. Crissy stood silently next to her father.

"I'll watch for the men," he said. She nodded and closed the door behind him.

He slid down the steep bosom of the peak, reached his horse and mounted. Looking back, he saw no signs of movement at the cabin, and felt something like disappointment. He had dared to hope that Crissy might wave a hand to him.

The wind had died to fitful gusts. The ground was dry, which meant that the main part of the storm had passed to the north of them. He aimed for the meadow below, wondering how his Herefords had fared during the storm.

He found a dozen steers huddled in the brush along the steam. Of his other forty head nothing could be seen. The lightning and thunder had stampeded them. And so he began the search, combing draws and gulleys that entered the meadow.

By noon he had rounded up ten more steers and brought them back to the meadow. He turned westward to work the draws on the other side. Here the country was even rougher, cut by narrow and treeless canyons. Poking around in these, he came upon a few more head, still restless and nervous because of the storm. They ran ahead of him up a canyon and he tried to race past them to make the turn.

He didn't know how it happened, but his leg-weary horse suddenly stumbled. He saw the rough canyon floor coming toward him and threw out an arm. The fall was sharp. One stab of pain raced across his brow and then the light of day vanished.

Some time later he was aware of a dull throbbing in his head. His ears roared, and mingled with the roar was the sound of voices. Sitting up, he passed a hand across his dried lips and tried to focus his eyes. Gradually things as-

sumed normal shape, and, seated on horses before him, he saw two men. Recognition pierced his pain and confusion, and he sent a hand to his hip.

"We got the hawg-leg, Williams," said one.

Mel nodded. Naturally a man of Scudder's caliber would not leave an enemy armed. He struggled to his feet and stood there swaying. Bowles had a grin on his crooked mouth, a grin of triumph. Scudder was as solemn, as sullen as ever. Mel found himself wondering where the men had been the past two years. Certainly they did not look prosperous.

"We was just on a hunt for an old pal of ours," said Scudder. "Thought mebbe you could tell us where he is."

Mel shook his head which was clearing rapidly now. Here were the men he had hoped to meet, and they certainly had him dead to rights. He must do some fast thinking from here on.

"We heard last week that Marsh Grant was let outa jail," spoke up Bowles. "We got a little matter to settle with that gent."

"Yeah, no gent ever double-crossed us and lived to brag about it," added Scudder. "What he told has kept us on the dodge for two years."

Mel wondered whether to stall for time. He started to explain that Grant's evidence meant nothing, since they had been caught in the act of rustling.

"Lay off that!" snapped Scudder. "We heard him set there in court and tell other things about us. He's been turned loose, and the only place for him to be is with Crissy. We hear she's got a job up at some lookout station in this forest. You should know where that is. Fork the horse and lead the way."

"And no funny business," warned Bowles, waving his gun. "Letting you have a slug is one of the fondest things I'd like to do."

Mel examined the knee of his horse which had been skinned by the stumble. He must have time to think. He mounted and glanced back at the two men.

"Murder is a tough rap to answer," he advised them. "You'll stretch rope, sure as hell."

"Let us worry about that, Williams. Nobody has laid a hand on us so far, including you."

MEL RODE the length of the canyon slowly, thinking desperately all the while. It might be possible to lead the men down across the south rim of the meadow, make a wide detour and hope for some break. Or he might, by some means, get a warning to Crissy up above. The latter seemed the best, for Scudder and Bowles would not stand for any descent, knowing that a lookout station would be high.

They broke down the slope and came to the edge of the meadow. Bowles kept his eyes upward, scanning the higher reaches. Not familiar with the country, he did not at first see the squat cabin perched on Buck Peak. Mel began to move his arms up and down, to wave them over his head.

"What's that for?" snapped Scudder, thumbing back the hammer of his gun.

"Just trying to loosen up my arms. I got a hell of a jolt back there when my horse stumbled. Arms ache like bad teeth."

"Ain't that some sort of a house on that bald peak yonder?" asked Bowles whose eyes had finally picked up the cabin.

"Sure," said Mel. "That's an old lookout station, not used any more."

"Where's the one Crissy's got?"

"Search me," replied Mel with a shrug.

"I'll bet you're lying like hell. I'll bet that's the shack up there. Where's the trail to it?"

"Yonder, across the meadow."

"You show us, and no tricks."

Mel could only hope that Crissy's sharp eyes had seen them across the meadow. If she had, she should be well on the way to some canyon further north. He came to the stream and pulled up, seeming to search for a good place to cross.

Near the far bank of the stream the

water was cloudy, as though a handful of dirt had recently been tossed in or some animal had walked along the shallows near the bank. He stared at it and his lips went dry. "Muddy water means trouble!" Her words darted back and forth through his aching skull. Slowly he swung out of the saddle.

"What's the idea?" snapped Scudder.

"I need a drink," Mel replied. "My head's as hot as a stove from that jolt I got."

Mel stepped to the bank of the stream. His eyes darted to the thick brush on the other side, but saw nothing. He knelt down, crouched there for an instant, and then threw himself face down at the edge of the water. And at that instant the roar of a rifle broke the silence of the meadow. The blast was so close that it made Mel's ears ring. Behind him, Scudder uttered a choking cry and pitched from the saddle.

AT THE risk of getting his head blown off Mel scrambled up and dived for the gun clutched in Scudder's lifeless hand. He got it and drew himself up on an elbow. Bowles had swung his horse to one side and had crossed gun arm over the saddle. He was aiming into the brush beyond the stream when Mel pulled trigger. The man grunted, fell forward and slid to the ground.

There was a minute of absolute silence, then Mel heard something like a sob in the brush across the stream. He waded in, parted the thick fronds and found Crissy kneeling there with her face hidden in her hands. He knelt beside her, put his arms about her.

"I— I never shot at a man before," she choked out.

"It's all right. You did a good job of it."

"I just had to, Mel, just had to. I couldn't let 'em come to Dad."

"Of course not. I was trying to think of some way to stop it. They had me covered, caught me after I'd been thrown off my horse. I tried to warn you by waving my arms as we crossed the meadow."

Her head bobbed up and down. "I saw you, guessed there was something wrong, some reason why they rode behind you."

"How did you get down here so soon?"

"I ran down. Packed the old gun with me."

"Crissy, you're a world beater!"

She shook her head. "I guess I'll always be just what you said—a litle hellcat."

"Nope, I was wrong. You've got a heap of courage, and you're mighty smart. You muddied the water in the creek so's I'd be warned in time to duck. That was smart thinking and planning."

"I didn't want you in the way when I shot."

"That must mean that you don't hate me so much after all."

She put her face against his wet shirt. "I don't hate you at all, Mel."

He drew her close and patted her shoulders. "I'm going to pack those two gents into town, Crissy, and then I'm coming back. I'm coming up to Buck Peak and I'm going to ask you something, something mighty important. Will you answer me?"

"I'll be waiting for you, Mel."

"And the answer?"

She looked up into his face. "There'll be no more muddy water. Never again, Mel."

Tenderly he bent his head to press a kiss on her lips.

He aimed at Zed, lying in the snow

Come Home, Mountain Man

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

HE WAS A LAWMAN in a land beyond the law, with only a courageous girl to side him against a pack of killers

THE WIND, roaring down the mountain pass, carried fine particles of snow that stung like sleet. United States Deputy Marshal Chet Rand kept the head of his tired horse into the stinging wind. An hour ago, he should have reached the mountain store he was seeking. Since he hadn't reached it, he knew he was lost. And a Rocky Mountain blizzard was closing in around him in the black dusk of the dying day.

"You're a fool to tackle them mountains in the winter," the grizzled train conductor had told him in the little town down below. "Let them holdup men go till spring. All they got was two thousand in greenbacks and a shipment of gold watches."

"They also killed the express car guard," Chet Rand said. The conductor shrugged. Guards were hired to take risks. "And that guard happened to have been my brother," Chet finished.

The conductor's face had changed then and he looked again at this tall, wiry man who wore the badge of a deputy marshal of the United States, weighing Chet Rand's grit and determination against snow-blocked trails, sub-zero temperatures, the howling winds of the high peaks, and against the fierce breed of men who lived in those high places of the earth. They were not like men who lived on the plains, the mountain men weren't. The deputy who went against them had to be all man.

"If you will give me a description of the watches they took—"

The conductor hunted around among the express car shipment records and found the information Chet wanted. "Twenty gold-cased hunting watches," he read, "ten open-faced gold-cased ladies' watches, made by the Eagle Watch Company, in New Haven, shipped to the Squires Jewelry Stores, in Sacramento."

Copyright, 1947, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in First December, 1947, Ranch Romances

He put down the paper. "Three men held up the train, Deputy. They stopped us by rolling a boulder onto the track. One man, with a rifle, stayed up in the pines and kept everybody inside the train. Two men opened the express car, and we heard shooting. They got away on skis."

That had been late in the afternoon of the day before. At the little gap town, Chet had gotten all the information available about the people who lived in the mountains up above, which hadn't been much.

There was a small mountain store high up toward the peaks, a store where the scattered mountain families traded furs for flour, salt, calico, boots, guns and shells. Leaving town the next morning, Chet had made the store his first objective. He would start his investigation there. He had ridden all day, and now night was coming around him, and a snowstorm was howling down from the high peaks. He was lost.

And somewhere on the slope above him, a wolf was howling.

Riding up, he had seen innumerable deer tracks in the snow and the gnawed bark of aspens where deer had fed. He had seen elk tracks too, and the tracks of the shy mountain sheep driven downward from the high peaks by the winter. Somehow these evidences of big game had made him a little homesick, and the mountains had made him feel like a man coming home after long wanderings in dusty, alien places. He did not understand this feeling. He was not coming home to the mountains—he was coming here on business grim as death itself.

The wolf howled again, a wailing sound that came from the steep, snow-covered slope at his left. Beyond the slope were pines, a heavy growth of them, dark green against the snow. His horse snorted, pointed its ears toward the pines.

"Easy, boy," Chet soothed. He loosened his revolver on its snow-clogged open holster. There were bound to be wolves in a country where game was so plentiful, and by the same token, they were not very likely to attack humans.

UPWARD, toward the dark growth of pines, he caught a glimpse of a dark object, moving. He strained his eyes trying to see what it was. Then the scream came, a wild, fierce call that rang down the mountain slope. A woman!

A woman was up there in front of the pines where the wolf had howled. Chet could see her clearly now. She moved away from the pines and her body was outlined against the white of the snow. Behind her, darting out of the pines, he glimpsed two wolves.

"This way!" he yelled. He jerked his revolver out of its holster, fired a shot into the air.

She came toward him, very fast. She seemed to be sliding on the hard crust of old snow. At the sound of his shot, she lifted her head, saw him, tried to wave at him. He fired a second shot into the air. He did not dare risk shooting over her head at the wolves behind. His horse began to prance.

She moved toward him at express train speed. His horse saw her coming, smelled wolf, and started bucking. Chet wasted precious seconds bringing the animal under control. The woman was coming directly toward him, coming very fast, and he caught glimpses of snow spraying upward and outward as she moved. His horse pranced directly into her path.

She saw the horse and, bending like a slender maple tree in a strong wind, tried to swerve to one side. She lost her balance, and one foot was lifted high into the air. Chet saw the ski on the lifted foot.

She tried to catch herself but went over. There was a splintering crack and her body spun end over end in the snow. Chet snapped a shot at a black shadow disappearing on the slope, then swung from his horse and ran to her.

"Are you hurt?"

"I feel like a bug with forty legs, all broken!" she answered. "You idiot! What were you shooting at?"

"Those wolves—"

"Wolves?" For an instant surprise showed on her face. Then it gave way to a burst of ringing laughter that made her, he thought, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Wolves?" she repeated. "They're only half-wolf, mister. The other half is black and tan hound dog!"

"They're yours!" he gasped.

"Or I'm theirs," she answered. "Sometimes I don't know which is which. Darn it, one of my runners is busted. And my leg—"

She was getting to her feet. As the pressure of her weight hit her left foot,

Martha May

she cried out and grabbed at his arm. He caught her, and she lay limp in his arms.

In the gathering dusk he could make out a mass of black hair peeping out from under a fur cap, an oval, brown face, eyes closed now, and he could see a slim body clad in wool from foot to head, a broken ski dangling from her left foot. He set her gently in the snow and began to unlace the left boot.

Off in the snow he was aware of dark objects moving. Half-wolves, she had called them. He wondered what kind of a mountain girl was this who came shouting down a steep slope at breakneck speed pursued by a pack of playful beasts that she claimed were only half-wolf.

His horse snorted and pulled at the bridle reins, urging its master to leave this place. "Easy, boy," he soothed. As he worked with stiffened fingers at the boot laces, he realized this girl had a revolver holstered at her waist. She sighed and opened her eyes.

"Does it hurt?"

"It feels like it's about ready to jump out of that boot all by itself. What'd I do, faint?"

"I guess so."

"Here, mister, let me finish unlacing that boot." Slipping off her mittens, she pushed his fingers away. "Take care of your horse before those dogs of mine spook him."

"Dogs? If they're dogs, why don't they come on down here?"

"Because they're scared of you. Ouch!" She pulled off the boot and waved a woolen sock in the air. "Sprained ankle, and it's already beginning to swell. And here I sit."

"Here we both sit." Chet Rand said. "Would you know where to go if you could walk?"

She glanced quickly at him. "Sure I would. I belong to these hills."

"Then let's get together," Chet said. "I can walk, but I don't know where to go. You know where to go, but you can't walk. You provide the guiding and I'll provide the transportation."

"You mean you're lost?" Surprise was in her voice.

"Nothing else but."

"Where were you going when you came this way?"

"I was looking for a store."

SHE NODDED as if he had said the right thing. "You got off the trail four or five miles back. What were you looking for at the store, mister? Are you some relation to Gibby?"

"Who's Gibby?"

"You ought to know, who he is—it's his store you're looking for." Her eyes were on his face now, scanning it with undisguised suspicion. "And by the way, what are you doing in these mountains?"

Chet grinned. He liked her directness but he wondered how much he could tell her. "Could that be my business?" he answered.

His reply did not disturb her. "Could be," she said. "It could also be that I'll leave you here in the snow."

"Would you do that?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I wouldn't."

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you're willing to take me, because I'd hate to force my presence on anybody."

Her laughter came again, a clear burst of it. "You're talking foolishness." Her hand went to the revolver at her belt. "Nobody forces his presence on me. And if this gun's not enough—" she nodded into the gathering dusk—"mister, I just wouldn't want to be the man those dogs didn't like."

Chet considered this. "There could be a lot of dead dogs around."

"Uh-huh!" A growl sounded in her voice. "There could be a chewed-up man, too. What's your name, mister, and what are you doing here?"

He grinned at her. "Are you still threatening to leave me unless I tell you my business?"

Her laugh answered his grin. "Shucks, no. I took up your bargain as soon as you made it. I'm just asking you the questions that Grad and Zed and Buck are going to ask when I take you home with me, so you'll have time to figure out the answers before we get where we're going."

"That's nice of you. Who are these people?"

"You're asking the questions now! Grad is my Grandfather Reeves. Zed and Buck are my brothers, except Buck—"

"I see. And will they ask these same questions?"

"And how they'll ask them! At least Grad will. Strangers, especially lost strangers, usually have just two reasons for being in the mountains. Either they're dodging the law or they are the law. Which fits you best, mister?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Maybe the difference between dying and staying alive," she answered. "But if you don't want to talk, you don't have to. If you'll just pick up my skis—get the broken one too, because I want the harness off it—and get my sticks and help me on your horse, we'll start moving. My name, in case you're interested, is Martha May Reeves."

NOW SHE painfully got to her feet and permitted him to help her to the saddle. "I'm Chet Rand," he said. "And I'm mighty glad to meet you, Miss Reeves."

"Miss Reeves!" the girl gasped. "Heck, Chet, I don't know who you mean when you call me that. We're simple folks up here."

"Okay, Martha May." He picked up her skis. "But where would simple folks learn to use these things?"

"The skis? We learned to use them from the French."

"The French!" he gasped.

"Uh-huh," she answered calmly. "The French fur traders taught my great-grandfather how to make and how to use skis."

He looked at her face to see if she was teasing him. Her face showed no hint of hidden merriment. "Do you know there hasn't been a French fur trader in this section of the Rockies since the Hudson Bay people were run out of this country over a hundred years ago?"

"Sure, I know it," was her calm answer. "But the French were here once. And we were here too. We're mountain men, Chet."

There was pride in her voice as she spoke, a pride as great as any displayed by a society matron tracing her lineage back to royalty. This girl traced her family back to the mountain men, to those adventurous bands of traders and trappers who ranged the Rockies and the Far West when the frontier of the United States was on the Mississippi River, and everything west of that river was wilderness, plains, deserts and mountains, where only the buffalo, the beaver and the Indian lived.

"Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Bill Williams—we came here with them," she

went on. "We're not new immigrants, Chet. We're original settlers, or darned near it. Only the Indians were here before us."

"Well, I'm damned!" the amazed deputy whispered. "Do you know—"

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he was a descendant of one of these same mountain men himself, but before he could speak she had settled herself in the saddle and a whistle shrilled from her lips. It was a sharp piercing sound, like the whistle of a boy, a blast that rang through the snowy pass.

In the growing darkness, a wolf howled in answer. And Chet Rand kept silent about being a mountain man himself.

It was an amazed and somehow a secretly pleased United States Deputy Marshal who led the horse along an invisible trail, following directions called to him from the saddle. The snow was still driven by the piercing wind, but it didn't seem to bother his eyes as badly as before, and somehow the wind didn't seem as cold as it had been. The night was warmer, friendlier. There was even a feeling of cheer in it, a feeling that was not offset by the fact that wolf dogs were moving along in the darkness beside him, keeping pace with the horse, lurking just out of sight among the pines.

On top of a flat hill a light gleamed from a window. "This is it," Chet Rand heard the girl call out. "We're home. And, Chet, I hope you've been thinking how you want to answer those questions I asked you."

"I've been thinking," he answered.

THE HOUSE to which she took him was a rambling log cabin that looked as if it had stood there a hundred years and had been enlarged from time to time by the addition of extra rooms. He tied his horse to a snow-covered hitching post and helped the girl from the saddle. Leaning very lightly on his arm, she walked with him to the front door and shoved it open.

"Hi, everybody. I've got a man with me. Come on, Chet." Leaning so heavily on his arm that he was almost carrying her, she limped through the door.

Chet Rand found himself in a large room with a fireplace in which whole logs were snapping fingers of flame at the mountain cold. The heavy furniture was handmade. There were deer heads on the walls and bearskin rugs on the floor. Candles and the fire made the only light.

Inside the room, two men got quickly to their feet. One of them—Grad Reeves, Chet guessed—stood at least six feet three inches tall, every inch arrow-straight. He had a white beard and long, snow-white hair that fell in locks around his shoulders. His hands were big and gnarled and knotty like pine roots.

As the old man rose to his feet, he looked like a prophet. But as he went across the room in two quick strides and snatched the Winchester rifle from the jutting prongs of the deer head above the fireplace, he looked more dangerous. Levering a cartridge into the chamber, he stood facing Chet Rand.

The black-haired man was much younger, but he had the same height and the same general build as his grandfather. And the same mind. He lifted a rifle from the corner beside the fireplace and turned to face the man who had come in with his sister.

The third man did not move. He had sandy hair and a hang-dog expression on his face. He was sitting at a table cleaning a revolver, a big frontiersman model Colt. Cartridges were spread beside him, and cleaning rags and gun oil. As the door opened, his hand went to the table top, scooped up cartridges. He plugged them into the cylinder, clicked it into place. Then he looked up. Three pairs of eyes faced Chet Rand.

"Grad," the girl said. "Put that rifle back on the deer horns. Zed, you set your rifle back in the corner. Buck, if you wiggle that pistol in this direction, I'll make you eat it."

Varying shades of discomfort appeared on the faces of the three men, but they made no move to put the guns away.

Martha May took a deep breath. "This

man saved my life," she said. "I took a spill and sprained my ankle, and I would have frozen solid if he hadn't come along and put me on his horse. Put that rifle back, Grad, and shake hands with Chet Rand."

Grad Reeves had eyes as blue as the mountain skies. The eyes were fixed on Chet Rand, weighing him, estimating him. Slowly the gnarled hands released their grip on the rifle. Still watching Chet, he took two steps backward and reached up and placed the rifle on the deer horns.

"That makes it different," he said. "Boys, put your guns away."

The black-haired man promptly put his rifle back in the corner by the fireplace. The brother with the sandy hair kept the big revolver in his lap.

"Buck!" Grad Reeves said, the crack of a whiplash in his voice.

"Oh, all right." Buck laid the revolver on the table, within easy reach of his hand. He did not take the shells out of it nor did he make any effort to veil the hostility in his pale blue eyes.

"Your name again, stranger?" Grad Reeves said.

Chet told him and they shook hands. The old man's grip was strong and firm, the kind of handshake that reveals the strength of a man. "If you saved Martha from trouble, we are beholden to you," he said.

"I would like some hot water," the girl spoke.

"I'll get it," Buck said.

"Never mind," the black-haired Zed spoke quickly.

FOR A MOMENT the gaze of the two brothers locked in some secret argument known only to them, then Zed went across the room and entered a door that led to the kitchen. Buck sullenly settled back into his chair. Chet, watching, wondered about the meaning of this strange clash between the two brothers over who would do so simple a thing as get hot water for their sister.

"Take off your things and pull up a chair to the fire," Grad Reeves invited, the requirements of hospitality struggling in the tones of his voice with the mountain man's natural distrust of any stranger. "You must be almost froze."

"I am," Chet answered. "And I've got a horse outside that's as cold as I am."

"I'll take care of your horse." Buck Reeves spoke, rising from the chair.

"I'll help you," Chet said.

"Help ain't needed," Buck answered. "I can do it by myself." He pulled on a sheepskin-lined coat, woolen cap and mittens, put the revolver in his pocket and stalked out the door.

Chet stared after him.

"Don't mind Buck," Martha May spoke quickly. "He's kind of funny."

The deputy shrugged and began to pull off his heavy coat. The eyes of the old man fastened on the pistol holstered at his belt. He took off the gunbelt, removed the cartridges from the gun, wiped the weapon thoroughly dry, then reloaded it, replaced the empty cartridges that he had shot at what he thought were wolves with fresh shells from his belt. He cleaned the snow from his holster, replaced the pistol, and hung belt and gun on the back of his chair, Grad Reeves watching with silent, wary eyes. Not until he had hung up the gun did the old man relax.

"You a stranger in these parts?" Grad asked.

"Yes," Chet said. "I'm a deputy United States marshal—"

The old man jumped as if a snake had suddenly struck at him, and the girl, sitting in front of the fire, turned startled eyes toward Chet.

"A deputy marshal—" Grad Reeves choked. "Martha May—" He snatched a rifle from the deer horns. And for the second time that night Chet Rand found himself looking into the muzzle of a gun.

"Get out of this house!" Grad Reeves said.

Martha May sat up straight in her chair.

"I didn't know he was that," she whispered. Her grandfather didn't seem to hear her. His eyes were on Chet Rand,

and they were blazing with white-hot anger.

"Get out!" the old man said. "Get out of this house."

Chet Rand did not move. "There's a storm outside," he said.

"I don't care what's outside."

"And I'm lost."

"I don't care about that, either. Get out!"

LOOKING past the muzzle of the gun, Chet saw the old man's blazing eyes. The sight shocked him. Unless he left the house this white-haired old man who looked like a prophet straight out of the Old Testament was going to shoot him! The intention was written in his blazing eyes.

"Get!" Grad repeated. The rifle was at full cock, and his finger was tightening around the trigger. Zed came into the room from the kitchen, saw what was going on and stood very still just inside the door.

Chet rose to his feet.

"No!" the girl said.

"Martha May, you keep out of this," her grandfather shouted.

"I won't keep out of it," the girl answered.

"He's a deputy marshal. And you know—"

"I know. But you're not going to shoot this man just because he's a deputy marshal, and you're not going to run him out of this house to freeze to death. Put that rifle down."

She had a pistol in her hands. The muzzle of the gun covered her grandfather.

"Thunder of the Lord," the old man whispered. "My own blood and bone, my own granddaughter, pulling a gun on me."

"Put down the rifle, Grad," Martha May said. Her face was pale but firm.

"You—you're defending a marshal!"

"I'm defending you," she answered. "If you send this man out tonight, he'll freeze to death and we'll be rid of him. But you know what will happen then. There'll be another deputy around looking for him. Maybe he won't get here until next spring, but he'll get here—"

"He'll never find this one."

"So what? He'll find us. And he'll start asking questions."

"I got the answer for them." The old man shook the rifle.

"If you answer questions with a gun, pretty soon there's a dozen deputies up here asking them. They've got guns too, you know, and they can shoot just as straight as you. Put that rifle down, Grad."

"No!" Grad Reeves said stubbornly. "You can be boss in some things but this is a man's job."

"I told you before, he saved my life," the girl said in desperation. And Chet saw the first flicker of indecision in the old man's eyes.

"So put the gun down, Grad," she continued. "And remember I'm your granddaughter and I'm just as stubborn as you are."

She spoke softly but with grim determination that was full of meaning. Chet saw the fire go out of the old man's eyes. It went little by little until Grad Reeves turned slowly and replaced the rifle on the deer horns. Standing in front of the fire the old man clasped his hands behind his back. From the door to the kitchen, Zed watched.

Chet took a deep breath and leaned over and patted the girl's arm.

"Thanks, Martha May, for keeping me from getting kicked out into the snow." Color swept into her face as he touched her arm. Across the room Zed looked bleak at the action. Grad, staring, started to open his mouth, then shut it again. "Thanks for lying for me too," Chet said.

"Lying for you?" Zed spoke, breaking his silence.

Chet Rand nodded. "About saving her life."

"No, Chet!" the girl gasped.

"What's that?" Grad Reeves asked, his voice a bull bellow in the big room. "You mean you didn't save her?"

"It was mostly the other way round," Chet said. "Now quit worrying, Martha

May," he told the girl. "I appreciate your sticking up for me, but I'll fight my own fights." He patted her hand again and turned to face the straight figure standing in front of the fireplace.

HIS VOICE was strong in the silent room. "Look, Grad," he said, "I want you to get this straight. When Martha May found me, I was facing the prospect of spending the night without shelter. I appreciate being taken in out of the snow, but I don't want to impose on your hospitality. I'm a deputy marshal and I'm here on business."

"Sneaking business—"

"Maybe you think it's sneaking, but I have another name for it. I'm up here looking for three men who rolled a boulder on to a railroad track and stopped a train. They held up that train."

"We got no train robbers here."

"I'm not saying you have. But you know the people up here. Do you know anyone who might have held up a train?"

"If I did, do you think I'd tell you?"

Chet shook his head. Behind him, he could hear Martha May breathing fast, as if she were running a race. "From what I've seen of you, I don't think you would tell me anything. But these men broke the law."

"We've got our own law up here in the mountains."

"You've lived up here so long you think there isn't any other world," Chet said. He looked Grad Reeves in the eye. "I'm telling you there is another world and that you're part of it. It has its law and you're subject to that law. And the law is big enough and long enough to reach up here."

"You'll have a rough time taking anybody out of these mountains to stand trial."

"I won't insist on that," Chet Rand said.

The room got silent then, as coldly silent as the snow packing itself deep into the canyons, as coldly silent as the tops of the mountains.

"What do you mean, you won't insist on their standing trial?" Grad Reeves said in that penetratingly cold silence.

"They held up the train, they killed a guard," Chet answered. "That guard happened to be my brother. So, when I catch the men I'm looking for, I'll take them to stand trial if I can, but I won't insist on it."

His voice was hard, like a thrown knife striking its target.

"Do you mean you'll kill them?" Martha May spoke, behind him.

Chet turned. "The guard was my brother," he repeated.

And she said, "Oh," in a frightened voice, as if she finally understood the meaning of what he had said.

Grad Reeves stood in front of the fire in taut silence, and Zed stood just inside the kitchen door, his face emotionless.

"Grad"—Zed whispered.

"I'll handle this," Grad Reeves said. "You keep out of it."

Zed flinched at the tone of his grandfather's voice.

"So make up your mind what you want to do," Chet Rand said to the old man. "If I'm not welcome here—"

"You're not."

"Then I'll go."

Chet turned to pick up his coat and the voice of Grad Reeves came again, saying, "Wait a minute. It was your brother they killed?"

"Yes."

"Then you've got to get the men who killed him," Grad Reeves said, as if he saw his way clear before him at last. "And you can stay."

GRAD REEVES stood motionless. Then he turned to his grandson. "Zed, get busy out there in that kitchen and start some venison frying. This deputy will be staying with us tonight. And him and Martha May are both hungry."

"Thanks," Chet Rand said.

"Don't thank me," the old man answered. "You've got to hunt down kin killers. That's the law of the mountains, Deputy, and I won't stand in your way. But don't make any mistakes about the way I feel. I hate the guts of any man who wears a lawman's badge." He poked

at the logs in the fireplace, savagely stirring the fire.

"Well," Chet answered. "At least we both know where we stand."

He sat down in front of the open fire, found the makings and began to roll a cigarette. The girl's eyes were on him, warning him or begging him, he couldn't tell which. Like a six-foot statue, Grad Reeves stood in front of the fireplace, his lined face haggard as he sought a solution to the knotty problem his granddaughter had brought in out of the night.

Chet looked over his shoulder at the front door, wondering why Buck was taking so long with his horse.

This was, he thought, certainly a queer household—a fierce white-haired old man who cracked the lash of his voice over two grown men as if they were boys, who grabbed a rifle like a gunman, and a black-haired slender girl who rode skis at breakneck speed down a snowy slope, a girl who raised dogs that were half-wolf, and who pulled a gun on her grandfather with the same effortless ease with which she rode the snow runners.

Zed came in from the kitchen with a pan filled with water from which tiny wisps of steam were rising. He set the pan on the floor in front of his sister, squatted down and began to remove her heavy woolen sock. The big man's fingers were as competent and as gentle as the fingers of a surgeon, Chet saw. The girl eased her foot into the pan of water and bent over to rub it. A bright object fell from the pocket of her jacket. Chet bent over and picked it up for her.

It was a gold watch, a woman's watch, new, and it was made by the Eagle Watch Company of New Haven, Connecticut.

"Oh, I hope it didn't break!" she gasped.

Chet held it to his ear. "It's running all right," he said, handing it back to her. There was a smile on his face, but inside he was as tight as a coiled spring.

She took the watch from his hand, glanced at the crystal, then held it to her ear. The concern on her face was only the fear that the watch might be broken. When she found it was all right, the worry went quickly away and she tucked the watch back into her jacket pocket. She bent again to rub her ankle. Zed went back to the kitchen.

Chet Rand leaned back in his chair and sucked smoke into his lungs and tried to make up his mind what he wanted to think.

Later, Zed called them to the kitchen to eat. They sat at a long wooden table, Grad at the head, Martha May at the foot, Zed on one side and Chet on the other.

Zed and Martha May ducked their heads as soon as they sat down. Chet, caught napping, did not realize what was going to happen until he heard Grad's strong voice lifted up. "Almighty God—" Chet hastily bowed his head.

"And deliver us from the enemy in our midst. Amen." The prayer ended. "Let's eat," Grad Reeves said. His gaze came across the table to where Chet Rand was sitting. "Eat hearty, Deputy," he said.

The venison was tasty and juicy. Chet's appetite was none the less hearty because of his feeling that he might be eating his last meal. Nothing was said about his business here. Nor was there any comment about Buck's failure to return.

After they had finished eating, Zed stayed in the kitchen to do the dishes, gently refusing Martha May's offer to dry and snarling at Chet for hinting that he might help. Chet went into the big front room and smoked in front of the fireplace. An hour passed before Zed came from the kitchen. "Where's your brother?" Chet asked him.

"What's it to you?" the answer came.

MARTHA MAY, hobbling around on a bandaged foot, showed Chet to his room soon afterward. It was a big bedroom opening off a long hall that extended across the back end of the building. She lighted the way for them with a candle in a pewter candleholder that had probably come across the plains in a covered wagon.

"Shove the big dresser over against the door and put your gun under your

pillow," she told him at the door.

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. "I can't tell how bad it really is yet, but when Grad makes up his mind, he won't change it again. He respects your right to find a kin killer, but that's all he does respect. If he ever sees a way to get around that right and to square his conscience at the same time, he'll turn Zed and Buck loose on you. And I can't stop them any longer."

"Will they obey him?" he asked.

"In this case, they'll love obeying him."

"How does he control them so well?"

"They're scared to death of him. He's raised them ever since they were kids, and he's licked them every time they so much as looked like they weren't going to obey him. Obedience is beaten into them now."

"Um," Chet said. At last he understood the way the two men looked at their grandfather. They obeyed him, but they hated him. "Some day they're going to rebel," he said.

Martha May sniffed at the thought. "They better have a gun in their hands when they try it. Grad's boss of them and they know it. He'll put a bullet in them if they don't do what he says."

"You're making him out to be a pretty tough sort of a man," Chet objected.

"I'm not making him out to be anything but what he is," she retorted.

"Why is he so dead set against the law?" he asked.

A shadow crossed her face. "It's none of your business, Chet, but I'll tell you. It's because of my father. Bill Reeves was his name. He disobeyed Grad and went down to the low country and found a girl he liked and got married. By the time us kids came along, he was doing fine. Then—he killed a man."

"Oh," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Martha May. But I still don't understand why this makes your grandfather hate the law."

"Because the man Dad killed was another mountain man. His name was Jim Brugger, in case you've ever heard it. Jim Brugger, or his brothers, had killed my daddy's brother. Jim Brugger would have killed my daddy if my daddy hadn't shot first. To Grad's way of thinking, my father didn't deserve being tried for killing a Brugger.

"He went down to the trial and tried to explain what had happened, but he couldn't even get to talk to the jury. They put my daddy in the penitentiary. He died there. After that, Grad hated the law with a hatred that maybe you can't understand. The law had taken his son away from him and cooped him up in a prison where there wasn't any fresh air and had killed him just as much as if it had hung him."

LIGHT from the flaring candle showed the strained expression on her face, and Chet realized she was on the verge of crying. "What do you think about this?" he questioned.

"I'm not doing any thinking," she answered. "But you keep the door blocked and a gun under your pillow tonight. Listen to that."

Muffled by the door between the hall and the living room but still clearly understandable was the voice of Grad Reeves, raised in prayer.

"He's praying to have his way made clear to him," Martha May said. "But don't make the mistake of thinking you are safe because he's the kind of man who prays. Get into your room now and don't stick your head out of it until morning, or until I tell you to. And don't show a light."

"Do you think Buck might be outside waiting for me to show a light?" he asked casually.

"I don't know where Buck is," she answered. "Good night, Chet."

He watched her limp down the narrow hall, the candlelight outlining her slender body. She went into the big living room. He turned and entered the bedroom, carefully closing the door. He felt his way to the bed, sat down on it and tried to think.

Three men had robbed the train. There were three men in this house. He hadn't seen Zed and Buck on skis, but Martha

May was certainly an expert on them, and her brothers undoubtedly knew how to use them. But could the seventy-year-old Grad Reeves use the snow runners? Chet didn't doubt that Grad could do almost anything he set his mind to doing.

But did Grad have to be included? It was hard to tell a man from a woman in ski clothes.

The thought shocked him. All night he had been forcing it out of his mind. He was unwilling to believe that Grad Reeves, a man who looked and talked like a prophet, was a train robber, and he was even less willing to believe that this man's granddaughter was.

But the fact remained that she had in her possession a gold watch made by the Eagle Watch Company. Maybe the watch wasn't conclusive proof that she had taken part in the robbery, but it was strong evidence that she knew the men who had.

In the dark bedroom, with the wind whipping over the roof, in the chilling cold, Chet Rand wrestled with his soul, with his sense of duty, just as Grad Reeves was struggling in front of the fireplace in the living room.

Chet knew it was his duty to arrest Martha May for questioning. The fact that he might find arresting her difficult did not disturb him nearly as much as the inner knowledge that he did not want to arrest her. He wondered if this meant he was in love with her. He called himself a blasted fool for even thinking a man could fall in love with a girl the first time he saw her.

Out in the night, one of her wolf dogs howled, a long wail that lifted above the roar of the wind. Inside the room, a board creaked. And Chet Rand knew, for the first time, that he was not alone in this room to which Martha May Reeves had brought him.

HE GOT swiftly to his feet. Something swished in the darkness. A club smashed down across the side of his head and landed on his shoulder. Stunned, he fell backward on the bed.

He felt the club lifted to strike again and hurled himself off the bed and out into the darkness of the room. His outstretched arms caught a man around the middle. He shoved the man backward. There was a grunt, a thud on the floor as the club dropped, then hands grabbed him, lifted him, threw him on the floor.

He hit on his hip and shoulder. "Damn you, Buck!"

"Damn deputy!" a voice growled. Hands grabbed his throat.

Chet Rand could hear Buck panting with satisfaction as fingers closed around his throat and cut off his wind. "So we got your brother, did we? And now I got you!" The fingers tightened around his throat. Blind fury moved in him.

He found Buck's little finger, dug his own hands into his flesh, yanked outward. A bone cracked as the little finger broke. Buck howled. Chet gulped cold mountain air and tried to get to his feet. Buck, already standing, kicked him in the face. He lunged at Buck in the darkness. His arms went around Buck's legs. He rose to his feet, carrying Buck up with him, then smashed the man down. The floor shook with the impact of the body.

Chet found his bed, began a frantic search for his gun. Before he found it, he knew he wouldn't need it. Buck wasn't moving. The fall had knocked him out.

Chet dropped to his knees, ran his hands over Buck's body. From one pocket he took a heavy watch. The second pocket held a knife, the third held a roll of bills. The gun was in the fourth. Chet took the gun, found a match, struck it. A bearded face looked up at him from the floor.

It wasn't Buck's face. It wasn't the face of any man he had ever seen. Chet looked at the watch. It was made by the Eagle Watch Company. The bills were greenbacks.

Chet Rand tore a blanket into strips, bound the man's hands behind his back, tied his feet, gagged him, then lifted him into bed and threw another blanket over him. Gun in hand, he opened the door.

So far as he could tell the dark hallway was empty. He went quietly along

it to the door of the living room, listened to the soft rumble coming from the room. "And in my time of trouble, oh Lord, show me the way to go—" Chet softly opened the door.

Alone in the big room, Grad Reeves was kneeling in front of the fire. Chet waited. Grad finished the prayer, then sat down in the big chair and stared at the fire as if he was seeking there the answer to his problem.

"Got something I want to show you, Grad," Chet said.

The old man turned. "You don't have anything I need to look at, Deputy, not that I know of."

"Come and see anyhow," Chet said.

Grad seemed not to hear. "What's that on your face?" he asked.

Chet ran a hand along the side of his face, found a lumpy bruise. His fingers came away red. "Blood, I guess. Come and see what I've got to show you."

"A bloody deputy asking me to come and look at something! All right!"

GRAD ROSE, took a candle from the table, followed Chet along the hall and into the bedroom. Chet turned back the blanket. He saw the old man's face turn rock-hard as he looked at the man. "Hal Brugger!"

"Who's Hal Brugger?"

Grad seemed not to hear him. Like a man in a trance, he turned and set the candle on the dresser. Then, without saying a word, he took a clasp knife out of his pocket and jerked open the blade.

"Hey!" Chet said. He struck down with the barrel of his revolver, a sharp blow on the old man's wrist. The knife clattered to the floor.

"You were going to cut his throat!" Chet gasped.

"Of course I was," the old man answered. "He's Hal Brugger. He and his brothers killed my youngest son. And when another of my boys was forced to kill Jim Brugger, they put him in the pen for it."

"But that doesn't excuse you—"

"I'm not looking for an excuse so far as a Brugger is concerned. I'm just looking for a chance. It's a blood feud, Deputy. I would have let it die out once, until they killed my boy. Zed! Martha May! Buck!" His bull voice roared through the house calling to his grandchildren.

From the hallway came the sound of opening doors. Zed, fully clothed, burst into the room. Martha May, her hair in pigtails down her back, limped behind her brother. "What is it, Grad?" Zed asked.

The old man pointed to the figure on the bed. "Hal Brugger," he said.

At the words, Zed's face changed, grew hard and bittter and as grim as death itself. His hand went to his pocket.

Martha May grabbed his arm. Chet Rand raised his pistol, then lowered it when he saw Zed was no longer attempting to draw the gun from his pocket.

"What's Brugger doing here?" the girl asked.

"He was waiting in here, for me," Chet said.

"Waiting for you—" She had trouble understanding what he had said. He could see her trying to figure it. He could see Zed making the same effort, and Grad.

"It makes no sense!" Zed said.

"Hal Brugger wouldn't have dared show his face within rifle range of this house," Grad said.

"Is that his face on the bed?" Chet asked.

He didn't wait for an answer. "Who sleeps in this bed regular?"

Their eyes turned to him at the question. They were thinking hard.

"No one sleeps here," Martha May said at last.

"It was her daddy's room when he was a boy," Grad said. His face tightened at the memory.

"Who knew I might sleep in this room tonight?" Chet questioned.

"No one knew it, except us."

"Is there any other bed where I might have slept?"

She shook her head. "This is the only extra room we've got."

"And if I spent the night here, I had to sleep in this room?"

"Yes. You could only sleep here."

"Okay," Chet said slowly. "Brugger helped hold up that train. The evidence was on him. He knew I was here and was after him. He slipped into the house and came to this room and tried to brain me and get away without making any noise. If he had used a gun instead of a club, Grad would have known he was here. The next question is—how did he know I was here?"

THERE was no answer to the question. "Takes some thinking about," Zed said slowly. "Hal's got a brother, name of Tom—"

"Has he got two brothers?" Chet questioned.

"Not any more," Grad answered. "There used to be three of them but my boy, Bill—"

"I know," Chet said. His eyes went to the girl in silent understanding.

"Why did you ask if he had two brothers?" she questioned.

"I had a reason," he said.

"A Brugger in my house!" Grad Reeves spoke in a dazed voice. "I have to think about this. I—let's go into the front room. I think much better when I'm looking at the fire." He walked out.

Chet did not try to stop him. "Just remember this man is my prisoner," he said.

"I'll remember it," the old man promised. They followed him down the hall and into the big living room. He stopped in front of the fireplace. Hands clasped behind his back, he stared at the fire.

The thunder of the gun shook the foundations of the house. Grad Reeves stumbled to the floor. . . .

Glass rattled. Zed, cursing, pawed the gun out of his pocket and smashed shot after shot at the window. Chet, with no target, held his fire. Martha May ran across the room and disappeared into the kitchen. Behind Chet Rand in the narrow hall, a second shot exploded.

The bullet went between his left arm and body. Two inches to the right would have killed him. He whirled, shot into the darkness of the hall, slammed shut the heavy door. When he looked back into the room, Zed was kicking open the front door and leaping out of it.

[*Turn page*]

MAKE CRIME YOUR BUSINESS

ON THE SIDE OF THE LAW!

Help fight crime! . . . Earn steady good pay as a Finger Print Expert or Investigator. I.A.S. trains you—by easy, low-cost home study lessons. Learn this exciting work in spare time. Write for full details now!

OVER 800 POLICE BUREAUS...

Employ I.A.S.-trained men . . . proof of what I.A.S. can do. Write today (state age) for details. No obligation. No salesmen will call.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE

Dept. 7963 1920 Sunnyside Avenue
Chicago 40, Illinois

STUDY AT HOME LAW FREE BOOK!

Prepare for the Bar!

Write today for a copy of our FREE book, "The Law-Trained Man," which gives the bar rules in your state and tells how ambitious men and women since 1890 have been preparing at home in spare time for the practice of law by studying the famous Blackstone bar-training course. All needed instruction material is furnished including big 16-volume law library. Law diploma awarded. Moderate tuition; easy monthly terms. Write for FREE book today!

BLACKSTONE SCHOOL OF LAW
225 N. Michigan Ave., Dept. 253, Chicago 1, Illinois

CARBURETOR TOO RICH
MAKES MOTORIST TOO POOR

Car owners who are wasting money, getting poor gas mileage due to over-rich mixtures, will be pleased to learn how to save gasoline by VACU-MATING OVER-RICH MIXTURES. Vacu-Matic fits all cars, trucks and tractors. *Automatic* and operates on the supercharge principle. Easily installed in a few minutes.

SALESMEN WANTED! Big Profits

For FREE particulars, how you can install one on your own car for introducing, just send your name and address on a postcard to VACU-MATIC, 7617-1970 W. State St., WAUWATOSA, WIS.

New Easy Way STOPS SMOKING HABIT

TOBACCO BREATH TOBACCO NERVES TOBACCO HEART

Banish forever the tobacco habit with its health killing effects on heart, throat and lungs. Don't be fooled by today's cigarette advertising with its tricky sayings and catchy jingles. Nicotine IS poisonous and a real danger to good health. Tobacco smoke DOES dry out the throat and make you cough! Sensational SMOK-NO-MOR Tablets must break the smoking habit within one short week or money refunded. Break your tobacco habit today . . . feel better . . . eat better . . . sleep better. Send no money, pay postman $3.00 plus postage for liberal supply, cash orders we pay postage. Write to:

CURTIS PHARMACAL CO., Dept. 15 C
53 W. Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill.

DEVELOP A STRONG HE-MAN VOICE

STRENGTHEN *your* voice this tested *scientific* way. Yes—you may now be able to improve the **POWER** of your speaking and singing voice—and in the privacy of your own room! Self-training lessons, mostly silent. No music required.

WRITE TODAY FOR FREE BOOK

Eugene Feuchtinger's great booklet "How to Develop a Successful Voice." It's absolutely FREE! You must state your age. Booklet mailed postpaid in plain wrapper. No salesman will call. Send your name, age now!

PREFECT VOICE INSTITUTE
210 S. Clinton St., Studio CX-6, Chicago 6, Ill.

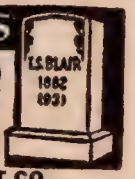
Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 448-T FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

TOMBSTONES

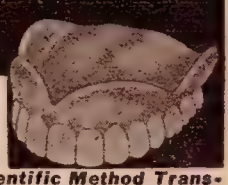
DIRECT TO YOU $14.95 up • EASY TERMS



Genuine Beautiful **Rockdale Monuments, Markers.** Satisfaction or MONEY BACK. Freight paid. Write for our **FREE** Catalog and compare prices.

ROCKDALE MONUMENT CO.
Dept. 438 JOLIET, ILLINOIS

New FALSE PLATE for OLD IN 24 HOURS



Low As Only $15.95

***Wonderful New Scientific Method Transforms OLD, LOOSE, Cracked or Chipped Plates into* LUSTROUS BEAUTY-PINK DUPONT PLASTIC PLATES**

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Why envy beautiful false teeth of others? We will transform your old, loose, cracked or chipped plate into a beautiful new, lightweight DuPont Beauty-Pink Plastic Plate, using your own teeth. All missing and broken teeth matched and replaced. Your cost amazingly low; actually save many dollars. No impression needed under our new scientific False Plate Method. 24-Hour Service.

SEND NO MONEY Enjoy life again, and save money on beautiful, new, natural-looking plastic plate. Rush name, address for full details sent FREE. If your plate is loose, we show you how to make it comfortable, tight-fitting before duplication.

West Dental Laboratory, 127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. S-45, Chicago 2, Ill.

MONEY for YOU Men or Women—Full or Part Time

Sell STARK Home Beautifying Plan

World famous Stark Bro's—Oldest, largest nursery in America—seeks men and women to make money calling on homeowners. Big demand now for home landscaping—flowering shrubs, roses, shade trees, vines, other "ornamentals". Also exclusive new fruit trees. Big profit on large, easy orders. Giant sales outfit FREE. Write today.

FREE! Sales Kit... Write Today

STARK BRO'S, Desk 6033, Louisiana, Missouri

In front of the fireplace Grad Reeves was crawling slowly toward Zed's rifle in the corner. He reached the gun and pulled himself into a sitting position with his back against the fireplace. Chet went to him. Outside the house a gun roared. "You—go help Zed," Grad said.

Chet nodded. Outside he could see, by the light streaming through the window and through the open door, two men striking at each other. One was Zed. He could not shoot. He saw a rifle barrel smash down, saw Zed stumble backward and fall.

The man with the rifle was a fur-clad giant who looked like an ogre. He raised the rifle and aimed at Zed lying in the snow. Chet shot him through the shoulder. The man dropped the rifle and grabbed for his shoulder. Chet went toward him. The man squatted down and tried to find the rifle he had dropped.

Chet brought the barrel of his pistol down hard across the man's head. The fur cap flew off. The man sat down heavily.

"Who are you?" Chet asked.

"Tom Brugger," the sullen answer came. Chet stepped behind the man, took a knife from one coat pocket, a pistol from the other. "Get up and carry Zed into the house," he said.

"Can't carry anything. Arm busted."

"You'll have a busted head to go with it if you don't do what I say. If you can't carry him, drag him." With the muzzle of his gun, he prodded Brugger to his feet. A rifle thundered in the house.

Brugger shied away. "That old devil will shoot me if I go in there."

"I'll shoot you if you don't go. Drag Zed through the door."

Holding Zed by the collar, Tom Brugger stumbled through the door. Chet followed right behind him. Grad was still sitting by the fireplace. Smoke was curling from the muzzle of his gun.

"Hal—Hal Brugger just opened the hall door," he whispered. "He's loose. I took a shot at him but—" His eyes centered on Tom Brugger. He tried to bring up the rifle. His failing strength was not equal to the task.

SUDDENLY the kitchen door opened and Martha May ran into the room. Three dogs were with her. Seeing them,

Chet knew where she had gone. She looked at him, then ran to her grandfather.

He waved her away. "I don't need any help, Martha May. You, Deputy, Hal Brugger is loose in that back hall. Smoke him out." Chet nodded, started toward the door.

Martha May moved ahead of him. The growling dogs moved beside her. "Just open the door, Chet," she said.

"And let you go in there for me?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "I'm not going in there. Just open the door."

He understood what she meant. Jerking open the hall door, he leaped aside.

"Get him out of there, boys!" the girl said to the three dogs. "Get him!"

A gun boomed in the hall, the bullet snarled into the room, and for an instant the three dogs hesitated. "Get him!" the girl repeated.

Claws rattled on the wooden floor as the three dogs went through the door. The gun boomed again. Then the snarl of fighting dogs was loud in the hall. Tom Brugger tried to sneak out the front door.

"Stand against the wall, you," Chet Rand said. Brugger obeyed.

In the hall a man was swearing. The snarl of fighting dogs grew louder. The profanity became a scream. Hal Brugger came stumbling out of the hall.

His face was gashed by fang marks, his arms were bloody, one dog was snapping at his legs and a second was leaping at his throat. "Take these beasts off me!" he screamed.

The girl had to call twice before the dogs came to her side. Their back hair was standing straight, their muzzles were bloody, and the wild light of battle flamed in their gleaming yellow eyes.

"Where's the third—" Chet began. A shot sounded from the hall. "There's another man in the hall," he ended.

"Get him!" the girl said.

Like arrows from a bow, the two dogs shot through the doorway. The gun boomed again, a hollow sound, and a dog howled. The snarls from the hall were wolf snarls now. Then came the profanity and the screams. The second man came out of the hall. Two dogs were tear-

[Turn page]

BOOST YOUR EARNING POWER WITH DIESEL

Train Now For This Big Pay Trade!

Are you mechanically inclined? **Then you'll like DIESEL!** You'll like working on these modern engines . . . pulling down the big pay of DIESEL-TRAINED men. Train at home for Diesel opportunities with simple, practical UEI Training. Learn DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, repairs, maintenance PLUS Scientific Motor Tune-up. Course includes shop training in our big, well-equipped shops, working on Diesel engines. Write now for FREE booklet!

UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE (Founded 1927)
2521 Sheffield Avenue, Dept. DR-8, Chicago 14, Illinois

'How to MAKE MONEY with Simple CARTOONS'

A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address

FREE BOOK

CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 73 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-358, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

FREE—Amazing Book on
RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!
BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.
In Business Since 1909 •
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta. • St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary.
DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write
GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

LEARN AT HOME
• to be a Nurse's Aide
• Practical Nurse
• or Infant Nurse

Prepare in spare time for a fascinating, high-pay career. Thousands of men and women, 18-60, are graduates of this physician-endorsed course. High school not required. Easy payments; earn as you learn. Trial plan. 54th year.
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 423, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send me free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name _____
City _____ State _____ Age _____

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Specially prepared "Patent Guide" containing detailed information concerning patent protection and procedure with "Record of Invention" form will be forwarded to you upon request—without obligation.

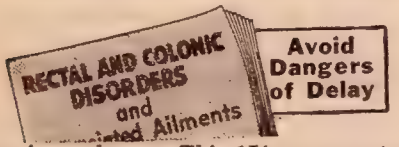
CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
38-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

OWN a Business

If employed, start part time. Alert dealers can gross $5 hourly profit on own service plus $3 on EACH serviceman. Clean, revive, mothproof rugs and upholstery on location. No shop needed. Services nationally advertised. Repeat customers. Easy to learn. Quickly established. Easy terms. Send today for FREE booklet. No obligation.

Duraclean Co., 3-693 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill.

FREE BOOK—on Rectal Troubles



Here is good news. This 171-page, up-to-the-minute book on Piles, Fistula and other related rectal and colon ailments—will be sent free for the asking. It may save you much suffering, time and money. Write today — McCleary Clinic and Hospital, 397 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs, Mo.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Swedish Massage graduates make big money working full or spare time with doctors or in hospitals, health resorts, sanatoriums, clubs, private practice. A dignified interesting career! Qualify for your graduation certificate. Thorough instruction at home as in class rooms. Write for Illustrated Book—FREE!

The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 363-C, 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

When You Visit Your Favorite Newsstand, Look for the Slogan

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ON THE COVERS OF THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

ing at him. The third, bullet struck and dying, was trying to crawl after him. He slashed at them with the pistol he held. It was Buck Reeves.

"Throw away your gun, Buck," Martha ordered. "And I'll call off my dogs." Screaming he dropped the gun and covered his throat with his hands.

She whistled shrilly, and then had to whistle again and again before the dogs came to her. The blood lust was on them, and they obeyed reluctantly.

"You, Buck, you, Hal Brugger, go stand against the wall," Chet ordered. They obeyed him. "How did you get loose?" he said to Hal. A glare was his answer.

"Martha May," Chet said. "Turn loose your dogs."

"I'll talk," Hal Brugger hastily said. "Buck cut me loose. I was playing possum when you left. For God's sake, don't let her turn them wolves loose!"

"You don't like wolves? How do you like robbing trains?"

"I don't know—" Hal Brugger began.

"Who was with you?"

"Wasn't no—"

"Martha May," Chet said.

"Billy," she spoke to one of her dogs.

BLOOD mixed with sweat was rolling from Hal Brugger's face. The threat of a gun would not have scared him, but this was dogs, not guns. "I'll talk!" he said. Buck Reeves growled, an animal sound deep in his throat. "We held up the train," Brugger said. "Don't—"

"Does that include Buck?"

"It does. Buck, Tom and me."

"Who shot the guard?" Chet Rand's voice had the crack of a whip in it. Emotions he did not know he possessed were rising in him, taking control. Hal Brugger started to speak.

"Shut up!" Buck Reeves screamed.

"I'd rather risk my neck in a noose than have my throat tore out by a wolf," Brugger answered. "We did it, Deputy. Buck shot the guard."

At the words, the muzzle of Chet Rand's revolver swung to cover Buck Reeves. This man, this sandy-haired killer had murdered his brother.

The impulse to pull the trigger was almost overwhelming. In that moment he knew how Grad Reeves had felt about

the man who had killed his son. In that moment, he at last understood Grad Reeves and Grad's actions. The same capacity for murderous hate that was in Grad was in him.

Martha May sensed his feelings. "Don't do it, Chet," she whispered.

He fought the impulse to shoot Buck. He was an agent of the law, not the law itself. It was his duty to bring these men to justice.

"Don't, Chet!" the girl repeated.

Little by little he let the muzzle of his gun drop. By the time the gun was pointing to the floor, he was bathed in sweat. With his sleeve, he wiped sweat from his face and turned to Grad Reeves. "Sorry, Grad," he whispered. "They've got to go down and stand trial. Buck, too."

The old man's hands were tight around the butt of his rifle. There was sweat on his face too. "I've been fighting the same fight you just fought, Chet," he said. "When I learned Buck had throwed in with the Bruggers and had slipped out and brought them back here tonight to kill me and maybe Zed, it—it was all I could do to keep from shooting him."

The voice weakened to a whisper. "It took me seventy years to learn what you just learned, Chet. I—I'm glad I learned it before I died."

MARTHA MAY ran to him, but his muscles were already relaxing and he was falling. He died easily and quickly, with his rifle in his hands, and a new spirit of truth and understanding in his heart. Martha May blinked back tears.

"Martha May, Buck's your brother. And I've got to take him," Chet said.

"He's not my real brother," she answered. "He was adopted before Zed and me were born. You take him. I know he's got it coming."

"I don't understand what you mean."

Her face was white, but her voice without fear. "I mean I'm his sister, by adoption, but he didn't want me to be a sister. Why do you think I raised these dogs, Chet, and taught them to tear a man to pieces, if it wasn't so I could keep Buck away from me?"

"Why didn't you tell Grad?" Chet whispered.

"Because Grad would have shot him if I'd told on him. And Zed would have

[*Turn page*]

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you have longed to stop smoking, try NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how the aromatic flavor of NO-TO-BAC Lozenges helps you give up the craving for tobacco. Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC for 7 days supply. (For heavy smokers — 16 days' supply — $2.) Money refunded if not satisfied. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. **More Ability: More Prestige: More Money** We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 3329L, Chicago 5, Ill.

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:
CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

EAR ACHE?
DENT'S
EAR WAX DROPS for fast temporary relief of accumulated wax condition
TOOTHACHE?
ask your druggist for **DENT'S TOOTH GUM, TOOTH DROPS or POULTICE**

COMPLETE New FALSE PLATE IN 24 HOURS
FROM YOUR OLD

NOW LOW AS... $15.95

Brand new process transforms your old, broken, cracked or loose plates into new lightweight plastic plates.

NO IMPRESSION NEEDED

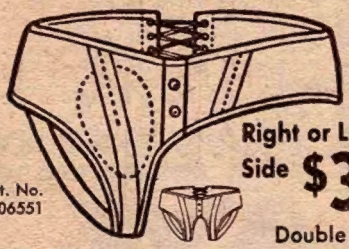
Let us help you enjoy life again. You will marvel at this revolutionary new method. Using your own old plates, we will remake them completely in only 24 hours. Missing teeth are carefully matched and replaced. Work is done on an absolute **MONEY BACK GUARANTEE.**

SEND NO MONEY —Just rush your name and address to us for full FREE DETAILS. If your teeth are loose, we'll tell you how to tighten them before duplication. Act now. Quit suffering!
Tru-Grip Dental Labs. 7th Fl., 127 N. Dearborn St. Dept. 15, Chicago 2, Ill.

Immediate Comfort
And Relief for You with *Patented*

RUPTURE-EASER

T.M. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Product)
For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Pat. No. 2606551

Right or Left Side $3.95

Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Adjustable back-lacing and adjustable leg straps. Snaps up in front. Soft flat groin pad—**NO STEEL OR LEATHER BANDS.** Unexcelled for comfort, **INVISIBLE UNDER LIGHT CLOTHING.** Washable. Also used as after operation support.

- **THE MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT.** Thousands of people who have tried old-fashioned, expensive devices turn to Rupture-Easer for new comfort.
- **RUPTURE-EASER IS SANITARY.** Can be washed without harm to fabric—you never offend when you wear Rupture-Easer.
- **NO FITTING REQUIRED.** Just measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and specify right or left side or double.

Over 400,000 Grateful Users

Harley Decoteau, Montpelier, Vt. *writes: "The last brace you sent me was wonderful. I have been ruptured for 30 years. I am now 36, and in 30 years, I have never been more pleased."*

Minnie LaJeunesse, Minneapolis, Minn. *says: ". . . the Rupture-Easer is very comfortable and almost a miracle as to the way it holds one in place, and am very much pleased and satisfied with the belt."*

Frank H. Lewis, Adrian, Michigan *writes: "Thanks to your Rupture-Easer I am able to continue my work."*

BLESSED RELIEF DAY AND NIGHT—You can sleep in it—work in it—bathe in it!

10 DAY TRIAL OFFER
Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief.

Piper Brace Company, Dept. TF-33
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.

PIPER BRACE CO., DEPT. TF-33
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.
Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side	☐ $3.95	Measure around lowest part of
Left Side	☐ $3.95	my abdomen
Double	☐ $4.95	is ..... INCHES.

(Note: Be sure to give Size and Side when ordering.)
We Prepay Postage except on C.O.D.'s.
Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $_____ ☐ Send C.O.D.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

done the same. I didn't want Buck killed because too many have been killed in these mountains."

She had risen and was standing very close to him. His arm went around her. The dogs sniffed at him, growling. She spoke to them and little by little the hair went down on their backs. "They like you," she said. "That means you like me."

"I have another word for it," he said. . . .

Next morning Martha May and Chet Rand stood on the porch of the big cabin looking out at the pines green against the fields of snow, at the white peaks, at the mountains rolling away tier after tier into the distance. He sniffed the clean air, the air of the faraway places, the air of the mountain men.

"Grad loved mornings like this," Martha May said, beside him.

"I see why," he answered.

In silence they drank in the beauty of the snow-covered mountain landscape.

"I guess you'll start back with your prisoners today," Martha May said at last. There was sorrow in her voice.

He stirred restlessly, making up his mind. "Yes," he said. "But—I didn't get a chance to tell you this till now, Martha May, but I'm the grandson of a mountain man myself. Bradford Rand was with Jim Bridger not very far from here, a long time ago."

"Bradford Rand," she mused. "I've heard Grad mention the name. I don't think he knew Bradford Rand, but he had heard about him. And you're a mountain man, too?"

He nodded. "I am. And all my life I've had the feeling that something is missing from me, sort of like I had lost something that belonged to me, that was rightfully mine. I didn't know what it was, until I came up here."

"You found it here?"

"Yes. It was the mountains, the hills, the pines, the clear air, the faraway sky."

His voice broke, then came again. "I'm a mountain man, Martha May, and when my business down below is finished, I'm coming back where I belong, to the mountains and you."

She stirred beside him, moving closer to him, and his arm went around her and there was contentment in him.

Learn RADIO-TELEVISION Servicing or Communications at Home in Your Spare Time

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You

I Trained These Men

Employed as Transmitter Operator

"A former employer recommended NRI training. Am now operator at Station WKBO." A. Herr, New Cumberland, Pa.

$10 to $15 Week Spare Time

"4 months after enrolling, averaged $10 to $15 week spare time servicing radios." William Weyde, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Makes Money With Own Shop

"Am doing Radio servicing full time. I owe my success to N.R.I." Curtis Stath, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

Works on TV Color Control

"My position with WNBT is video control engineer on the RCA color project." W. Deem, Malverne, N.Y.

Praises N.R.I. as Best Course

"I realized a profit of $300 by the time I completed the course." J. Hopper, Nitro, West Virginia.

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build, with parts I send, helps you make extra money servicing sets, get practical experience. All equipment I send is yours to keep.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million home and auto Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized—hundreds of these expected to be in operation in 1953. This means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures. More operators, installation and service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in Television! Want to get ahead? Find out what Radio and Television offer you. Mail card today!

See Other Side

TELEVISION

Is Today's Good Job Maker

TV now reaches from coast to coast. Qualify for a good job as a service technician or operator. My course includes TV . . . you learn by practicing on circuits common to Radio and TV. Mail card. NRI training is a tested way to better pay.

FIRST CLASS
PERMIT NO. 20-R
(Sec. 34.9, P.L.&R.)
WASHINGTON, D. C.

BUSINESS REPLY CARD
NO POSTAGE STAMP NECESSARY IF MAILED IN THE UNITED STATES

4c POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY

NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE

16th and U Sts., N.W.

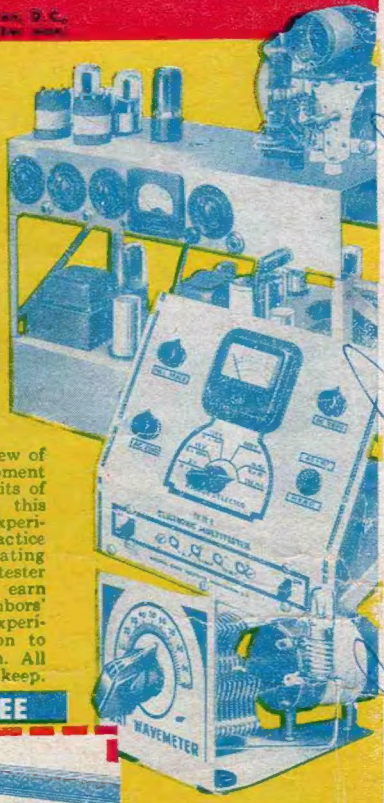
Washington 9, D.C.

Harold R Jones Glendale

I Will Train You at Home for GOOD PAY JOBS in RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Washington, D.C.
Has helped more men in Radio-Television than any other man.

Do you want a good pay job, a bright future, security? Or your own profitable business? Then get into the fast-growing RADIO-TELEVISION industry. Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience, many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from my easy-to-understand illustrated lessons. Get practical experience on actual equipment I furnish. Read below how many make $5, $10 a week and more extra fixing neighbors' radios in spare time while learning, get good jobs, build successful businesses of their own. It's where you find growth that you also find opportunity. Radio-TV industry is growing fast. Send for MY FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Postage-free card entitles you to an actual lesson that shows how practical it is to learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-Page Book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning, see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Cut out and mail card today . . . no stamp needed! J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 39th Year!



SEE OTHER SIDE

You Practice with Parts I Send

Earn While You Learn

Keep your job while training. I show you how to earn extra money while learning at home. I start sending you Special Booklets that start teaching you servicing jobs the day you enroll. Multitester you build with my equipment helps. Many students make $5, $10 and more a week extra fixing neighbors' radios evenings and Saturdays.

Shown at right are just a few of the many pieces of equipment NRI students build with kits of parts I furnish. You use this equipment to get practical experience, make many tests. Practice servicing radios or operating Transmitter. You build Multitester valuable in servicing sets, earn extra money fixing neighbors' radios in spare time . . . experiment with circuits common to both Radio and Television. All equipment I send is yours to keep.

Mail Card—Actual Lesson and Book FREE

CUT OUT AND MAIL THIS CARD

Sample Lesson & 64-Page Book FREE

This card entitles you to Actual Lesson from NRI Course; see how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Cut out and mail this card now!

NO STAMP NEEDED! WE PAY POSTAGE 3CO

Mr. J. E. Smith, Pres., National Radio Inst., Washington 9, D.C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and Book, "How to be a Success in Radio-Television." (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

NAME Harold R Jones AGE 71

ADDRESS Glendale

CITY ..... ZONE 200 STATE SD

Want Your Own Business?

Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown below, says, "Am now tied in with two television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."